

The next generation of Yankees

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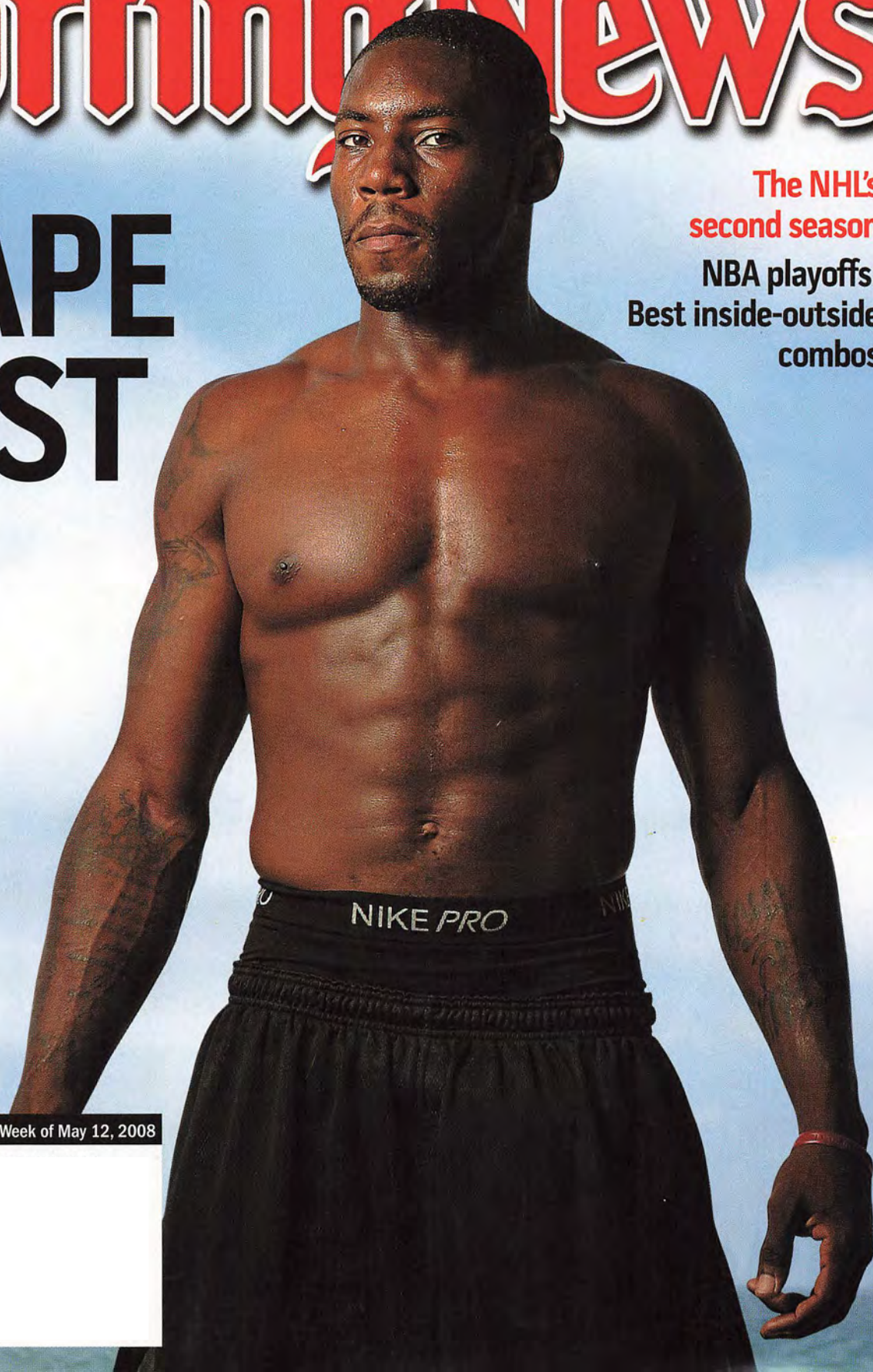
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MARVEL



> BASEBALL

8 Solving the Yankees' energy crunch

Melky Cabrera and Robinson Cano are injecting youthful electricity—and plenty of talent—into a graying lineup. *By Sean Deveney*

> NBA PLAYOFFS

14 PowerPoint

Put Carlos Boozer and Deron Williams together and you've got one heck of a presentation. *By Steve Greenberg*. Plus, a look at other great forward/point guard duos in the league.

> NHL PLAYOFFS

20 The second season

It's all for one and one for all. It's life one night and death the next and—always—a maniacal pursuit of the Cup. It's playoff hockey. *By Chuck Gormley*

> NFL

COVER STORY

24 A mama's boy, but his own man

After all that life has thrown his way, San Diego's Antonio Cromartie has many fascinating stories to tell. But getting the NFL's most exciting comeback to reveal the most important one is as hard as completing a pass in his area. *By Matt Crossman*

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MAGAZINE

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8 Alex Rodriguez doesn't need that Red Bull. Not with Robinson Cano around.

KNOW IT ALL

- 2 To Know List** Smith? Eveland? Gaudin? A different staff, same results for the A's.
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TO KNOW LIST

6 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1 THE MAIN EVENT

Different staff, same results

Five years ago, the A's rotation was the best in the American League, an absurdly talented group that featured Tim Hudson, Barry Zito and Mark Mulder as the Big Three, Rich Harden as No. 4 and Ted Lilly as No. 5. That bunch led a staff that posted a 3.63 ERA, nearly a full run below the league average.

News that Zito would move to the bullpen after yet another mighty struggle in his second year since leaving the A's for the Giants had to drum up nostalgia for that great group of Oakland hurlers. Only Harden remains, and with just 15 starts in the past three years, he hardly counts. The staff has dispersed throughout the majors, and the back part of the rotation has fared far better than what was once the Big Three. The lesson here for any general manager: Don't fall in love with your pitching staff.

A's G.M. Billy Beane certainly understands that. Not only did he help move nearly every member of his '03 pitching crew before they became big-money guys, but he dealt Dan Haren, last year's ace and A.L. All-Star Game starter, and has considered deals for Joe Blanton.

The results have been smashing. Greg Smith, Dana Eveland and Chad Gaudin are 25 or younger and have the makings of the second coming of the Big Three. The A's pitching staff is again tops in the league, with a 3.26 ERA, nearly a run lower than the league average. "We came into the season hoping we could find some guys who would keep us in games," says manager Bob Geren. "We've gotten more than that."

But, given the success Beane has had dealing pitchers before, A's fans probably shouldn't get too attached to the new guys.

—Sean Deveney



Greg Smith
Salary: League minimum
Record: 2-1
ERA: 2.73
Compares to: Barry Zito



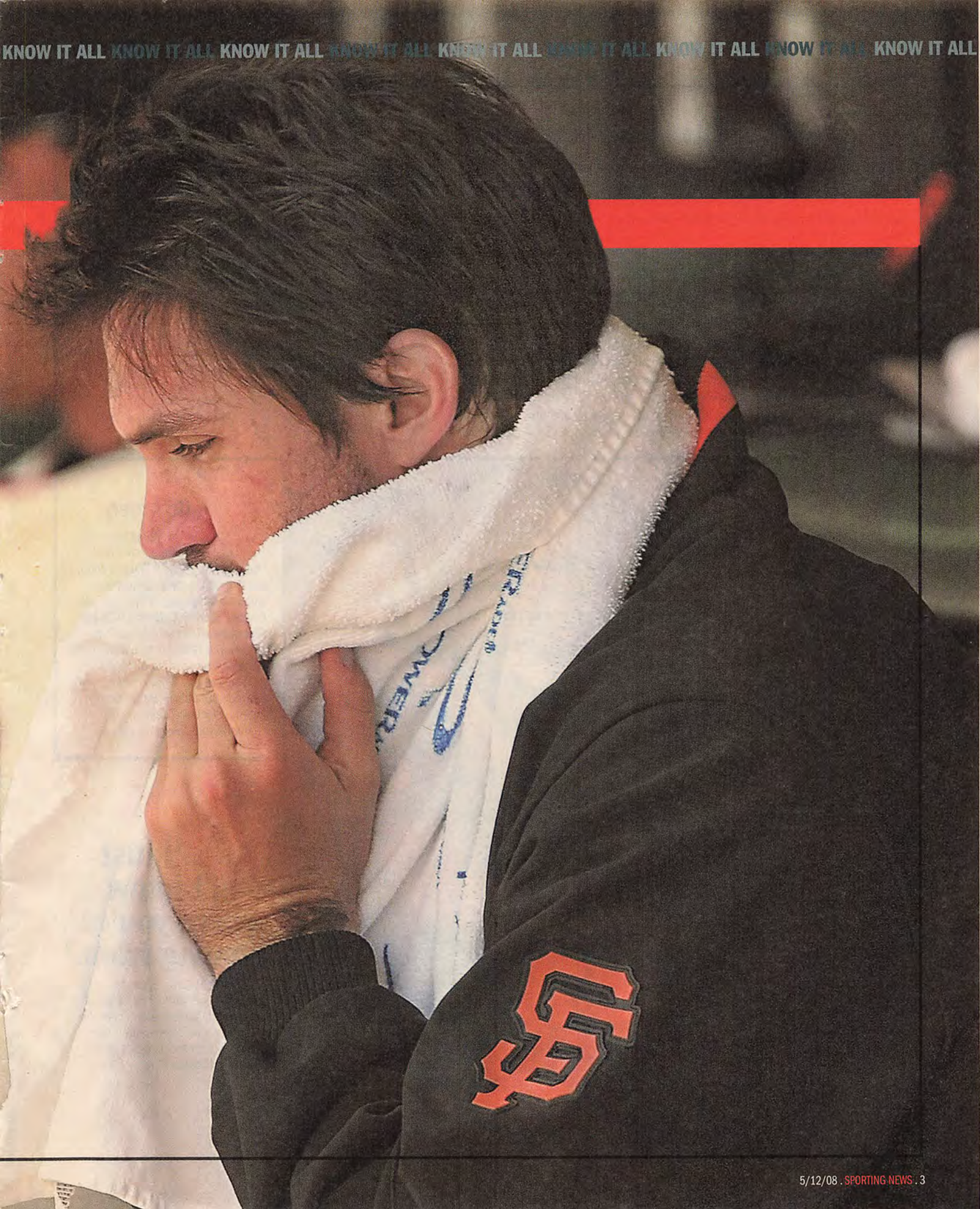
Dana Eveland
Salary: \$395,000
Record: 3-2
ERA: 3.67
Compares to: Mark Mulder



Chad Gaudin
Salary: \$1,775,000
Record: 3-2
ERA: 3.75
Compares to: Tim Hudson

It has been a tough year for Zito, whose old team is doing just fine without him.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



2

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE NBA COACHING CAROUSEL
It's nice to have a little security

It's obvious NBA coaches have no more security than American autoworkers when the jobs of the three previous coaches of the year (Mike D'Antoni, Avery Johnson and Sam Mitchell) come into question *after* they lead their teams to the playoffs. But a few of the league's coaches have accrued enough power to leave on their own terms.

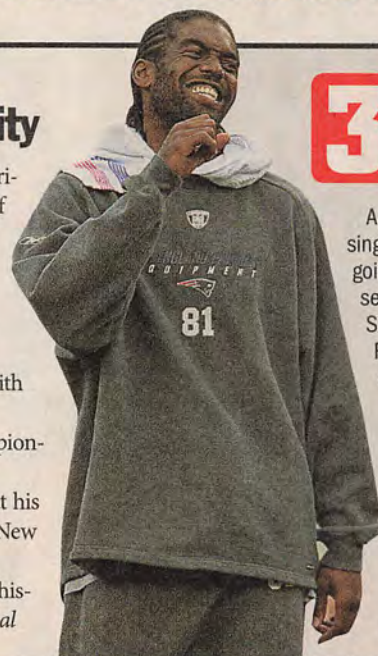
1. Gregg Popovich, Spurs. The idea of the Spurs without Pop is as unfathomable as a court without baskets.

2. Phil Jackson, Lakers. He has nine rings and a huge contract and sleeps with the boss' daughter.

3. Jerry Sloan, Jazz. In his 20th season with the team, he has yet to win a championship and the Jazz haven't fired him. Why would they now?

4. Byron Scott, Hornets. He is due to sign an extension after the season, but his biggest source of security may be that he gets along with his point guard in New Orleans, which wasn't the case in New Jersey.

5. Doc Rivers, Celtics. Guiding his team to the biggest turnaround in league history should give Doc a couple of years. At least you would hope so. —Stan McNeal



3

LIFESTYLES
The need for speed

Apparently, breaking the single-season touchdown record, going undefeated in the regular season and making a trip to the Super Bowl wasn't enough for Randy Moss—he wants to dominate another sport, too. The Patriots' wide receiver announced last week he is forming a team that will compete in NASCAR's Craftsman Truck Series. Moss Motorsports is expected to debut in the second half of this season.

Moss

4

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

3

Class of 2008 College Football Hall of Fame inductees who were on the field in Super Bowls 27 and 28. Former UCLA quarterback **Troy Aikman** and former Wyoming tight end Jay Novacek were on the two victorious Dallas Cowboys teams, and former Oklahoma State running back Thurman Thomas was on the other sideline with Buffalo both years. The three are among 15 players and coaches who will be inducted in December.



5

DVDS
Go green

Will Boston bring home another NBA title this spring? We'll find out soon, but in the meantime, Celtics fans can do a little living in the past with the new **Boston Celtics: 1985-86 Champions** DVD set (\$49.98, in stores). The seven-disc collection includes every minute of all six games from the 1986 Finals between the Celtics and Rockets—the most recent of Boston's 16 championships. For now, anyway.

6

IT BEARS REPEATING

'I just don't know where you're coming from.'

—Journalist Buzz Bissinger to Deadspin.com editor Will Leitch, in perhaps the understatement of the hour, during an often-contentious roundtable on sports blogs on the HBO show *Costas Now*

ON DECK

All times Eastern

>>>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports

PICK of the WEEK

SAT 10

NASCAR returns to Darlington Raceway (6:30 p.m., FOX), a track so notorious it has two nicknames (The Lady in Black and The Track Too Tough to Tame). The track surface used to be death on tires, but it was repaved since the last race. Interesting tidbit: The event is on Saturday night because the sport's sanctioning body sees racing as verboten on two Sundays—Easter and Mother's Day. Most drivers would run over their mothers to win, but they cannot run her over on her special day.



FRI 9 A plethora of **NFL minicamps** starts this weekend. If all goes well in Oakland, Darren McFadden will make his first appearance in silver and black. If all goes well in Atlanta, nobody will be accused of any felonies. If all goes well in Houston ... a viable NFL team will show up.

SUN 11 Former Twin Big Papi looks to do big damage as **Boston and Minnesota** play the third game of a four-game series at the Metrodome (8:05 p.m., ESPN).

MON 12 It's May, so you know horse stories are big. **Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel** (10 p.m., HBO) offers this ominous-sounding preview: "Bernard Goldberg examines the shocking path some racehorses take from their days on the track to slaughterhouses outside U.S. borders."

THU 15 *Raging Bull* is widely considered the best boxing movie ever. The fight scenes are frighteningly realistic ... or are they? Decide for yourself when you watch **Classic Boxing** (ESPN Classic, midnight) as the "hero" of the movie, Jake LaMotta, takes on Eugene Hairston in 1952. —Matt Crossman

STARTING 5

1 **Over the border.** I read the Bills will be paid \$78 million to play in Toronto. As a Lions fan, I'd pay \$100 million for Matt Millen to be G.M. there.

2 **Plus-one.** One commissioner proclaimed the "BCS has never been healthier." And Roger Clemens has never been more famous.

3 **The draft.** I, for one, am glad to finally put the draft in the rearview mirror. Can't say the same for Hal in accounting, who won't stop talking about the upside of the honey buns in the vending machine.

4 **This joke written by Paula Abdul:**
Gfkajdfol kndsljs-
dafkksdfl jast.

5 **Randy Moss.** He's the latest sports figure to get involved in NASCAR. No word yet on who will drive for his team, but here's a vote for Carl Edwards. After he wins, he can do a back flip—and moon the crowd at the same time. —M.C.



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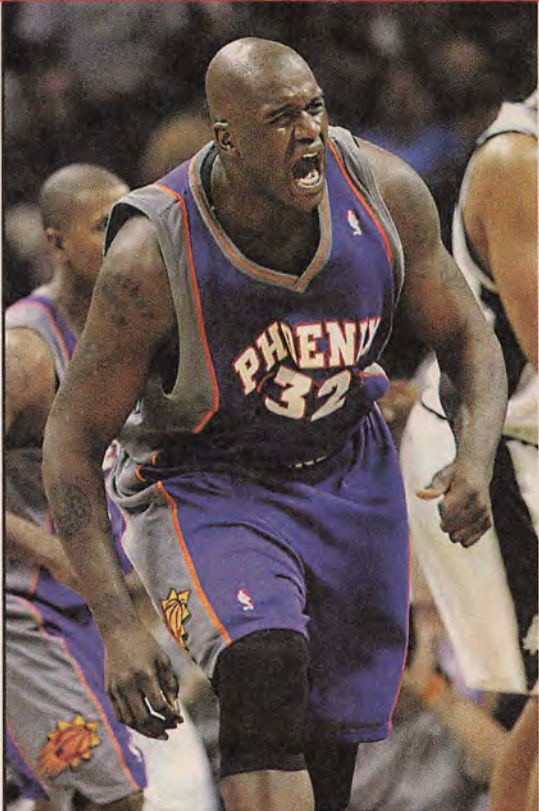


YOUR TURN

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BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com



The Suns went from The Matrix to Scary Movie 32.

—kb24raiderjapp via SportingNews.com

be fundamentally sound. If they have any talent, Brown will squeeze 45 wins out of them. Of course, he'll probably be gone in two years. —The 50year oracle via SportingNews.com

■ Andrew Bynum (SN, April 28) is just the icing on the cake. Don't underestimate the Lakers, who have a solid team. Bynum needs to take his time so they can rock and roll all over the NBA for the next five years. —joe-mama805 via SportingNews.com

■ Every program in America can talk about tough injuries and close calls. I can't figure out for the life of me how Pitt coach Dave Wannstedt (SN, April 28) has kept his job this long. —SpartanBeta via SportingNews.com

■ Roger Clemens' once-shining armor is now nothing more than a heap of rust. I can't believe I admired this guy. If it's true he had sex with a 15-year-old (Clemens denies the relationship was sexual), he needs to be tossed in jail with the rest of society's scum. After his steroids episode, who in the world is going to believe him about anything? —rbdonovan via SportingNews.com

■ Roger Clemens, you need more help than Dr. Phil or Oprah can ever give you. —bargnani_is_my_home-boy via SportingNews.com

■ The Mavericks' loss to the Hornets was not all Avery Johnson's fault, but I still think he had to go. The team played with no passion during that series. —cboysfn10 via SportingNews.com

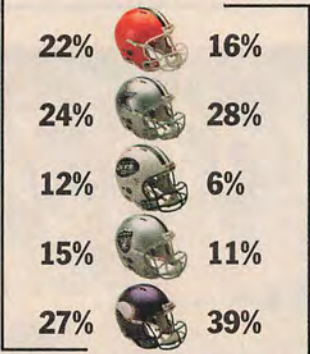
■ I have always known that Mark Cuban was crazy as hell, but I didn't know he was a bonehead to boot. He had a potential Hall of Fame coach and he fired him just like that. Cuban traded away the team's budding young point guard for an over-the-hill guy who quit on them. What did he expect? —njm1314 via SportingNews.com

■ Larry Brown is a good hire for the Bobcats. They'll

POLLING PLACE

Which NFL team has had the best offseason so far?

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RE: DRAFT POSTMORTEM

Posted by [sportsgoddess](#)

I just can't picture Matt Ryan as a franchise quarterback. I disliked the Joe Flacco pick by Baltimore just as much. On the other hand, I loved Green Bay taking Brian Brohm and Matt Flynn. That's forward thinking.

RE: LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

Posted by [TOTD2008](#)

I can understand why people hate Kobe Bryant. If I were a Nuggets fan, I would have wanted J.R. Smith to punch him in the face. Kobe brought everything that supporters love (long-range bombs, high-flying dunks, savvy bank shots, pinpoint passes) and everything detractors hate (trash-talking, preening, juvenile hand gestures). As has been the case throughout his career, it was Kobe being M.J. without M.J.'s charisma.

So I can appreciate the disgust aimed toward Kobe. I felt the same way when I watched Joakim Noah play the peacock against UCLA and Jonathan Papelbon celebrate every playoff save like he had just won the lottery. But however much I can understand, it's impossible once you've chosen Kobe's side not to enjoy every second of it.

RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on [Sporting News Radio](#)

'The Lakers are the team to beat. There's no way that Kobe doesn't bring home ring No. 4.'

—Ira in Phoenix on [The Matt Spiegel Show](#)

SPORTING NEWS RADIO

Extra points

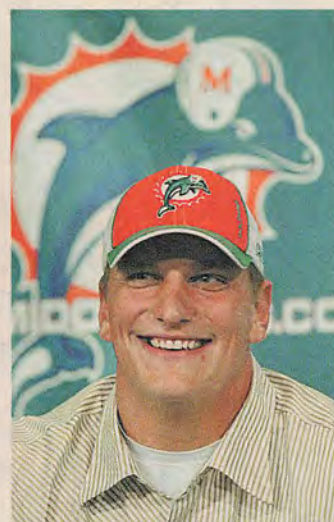
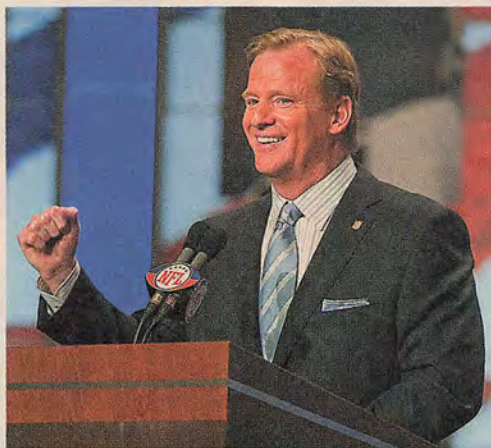
NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on the players in the league

I'm so proud of our players and what they do. Unfortunately, you get a few that are involved in things you don't want them to be involved with, and that paints all the players with a bad brush. I think that's wrong because our guys do so many great things.

Goodell on his reputation as a disciplinarian

We've got 2,000 young men. They're all in their 20s, there's a tremendous amount of media attention on them, they've had life-changing events ... and not everybody comes with the same kind of resources. They weren't as fortunate as I was to have a good family or people that maybe had a positive influence on them. I think we have to understand we're dealing with a diverse group of people. They're going to make mistakes.

The reality, to me, is you just can't continually repeat mistakes. And when you don't take your responsibility seriously—to the game and to the former players and the players who are playing the game—then I don't have much interest in spending a lot of time on it.



Dolphins first-rounder Jake Long on the team's rebuilding efforts

They're going to bring in great people, hard-working people, and do great things for the organization. I'm excited that they wanted me to be a part of that, that they trust me that way. And I'm going to come out and do everything I can to help this team win.

Chiefs first-rounder Glenn Dorsey on questions about his health

It's very frustrating. If you look at it, even when I got hurt, I still played, you know what I mean? That looks encouraging in my book, but different people take things different ways. They have their own opinion about it, and I can't control that. What I can control is make sure I'm working hard and doing what I can.



S Bob Berger and Bob Stelton appear on *Sporting News Radio* every weekend from 1-7 p.m. ET.

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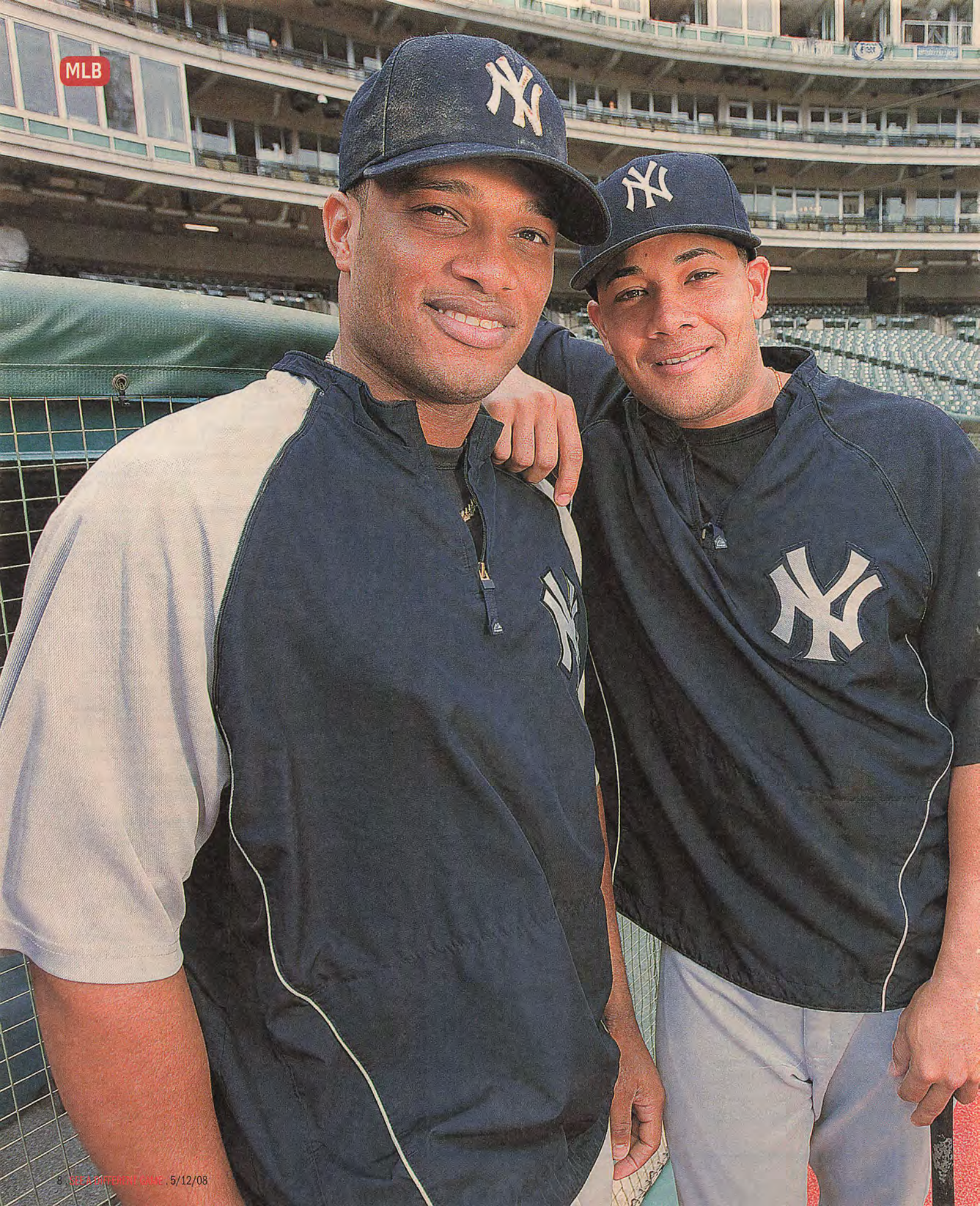
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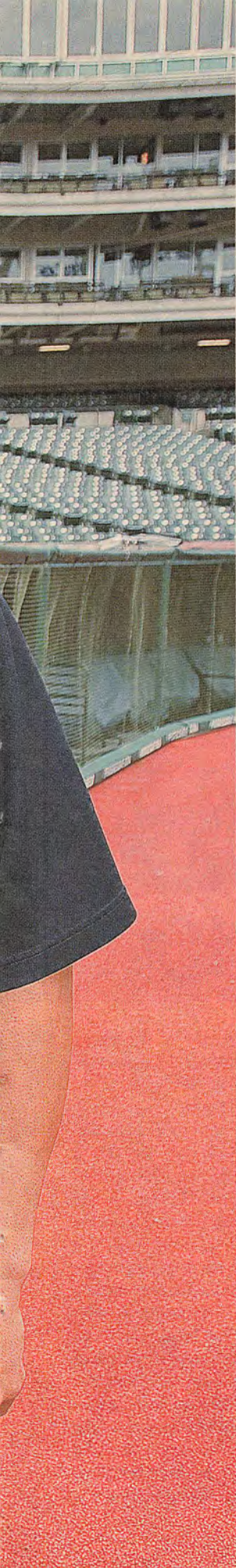
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MLB



SOLVING THE YANKEES' ENERGY CRUNCH

Robinson Cano
and Melky Cabrera
are injecting
youthful
electricity—
and plenty of
talent—into a
graying lineup

By Sean Deveney

Photos by Albert Dickson

**Cano (left)
and Cabrera are
the Yankees'
future, even if
most fans haven't
realized it yet.**

This is how things are going for Yankees second baseman Robinson Cano, if you must know. Top of the fifth inning, at Progressive Field in Cleveland, and Cano settles into the lefthanded batter's box, coiled like a samurai.

He entered the game with a .152 batting average, which ranked second in the majors. You know, from the bottom. Indians lefthander C.C. Sabathia hangs a slider, a bad pitch, the kind Cano ought to crush. Instead, he tops it weakly to second base. A break, though: He hits it so weakly he beats out the throw for an infield single. Before Sabathia—who rarely checks runners with throws—tosses his next pitch, he has Cano picked off first base. There's a rundown. Cano is tagged out. If on-base percentage were measured in actual time spent on the bases, this trip would barely register for Cano.

This is how things are going for Yankees center fielder Melky Cabrera, thanks for asking. Moments after Cano is called out, Cabrera takes a changeup from Sabathia and launches it into the left field seats, staking the Yankees to a 1-0 lead. The pitching holds up for the rest of the afternoon, and, presto, Cabrera is the day's offensive star. Third baseman Alex Rodriguez, Cabrera's frequent workout partner, notes after the game, "He's in a zone right now, in a very good place. He's just in phenomenal shape. I think that is a big part of his start—he's got a big energy level. He's our battery on this team."

If the Yankees have a battery, it's a twin job—Cabrera and Cano, two guys born and raised just

Cano has been struggling at the plate but is holding his ground at second base.



After a searing spring in which he hit .446, Cano is struggling. But he and Cabrera are the young guys who matter most on this team, the ones who truly hold Steinbrenner the Younger's blood pressure cuff in their hands.

miles apart in the Dominican Republic who have become the best of friends in their short big league stints. Cano was only 22 when he was called up from the minors early in the 2005 season, but Cabrera was even younger, 20, when he was summoned later in the year. Cano, always an effervescent extrovert, immediately took the shy Cabrera under his wing. They're not related, but the two call each other "primo," Spanish for *cousin*. "Ever since I came up," Cabrera says, "he's been there, helping me. He's like my brother."

Together, they are the espresso shots on a Yankees team that can sometimes be professional to a fault. The club's regulars are mostly graybeards (or, at least, getting there). Rodriguez will turn 33 this year. Outfielders Johnny Damon, Bobby Abreu and Hideki Matsui, plus shortstop Derek Jeter, are or will be 34 this season. Catcher Jorge Posada and

designated hitter Jason Giambi are near or at 37. Those players can still produce, and age has blessed them with undeniable wisdom. But they are heading into their professional twilights, and concerns over injury and complacency abound.

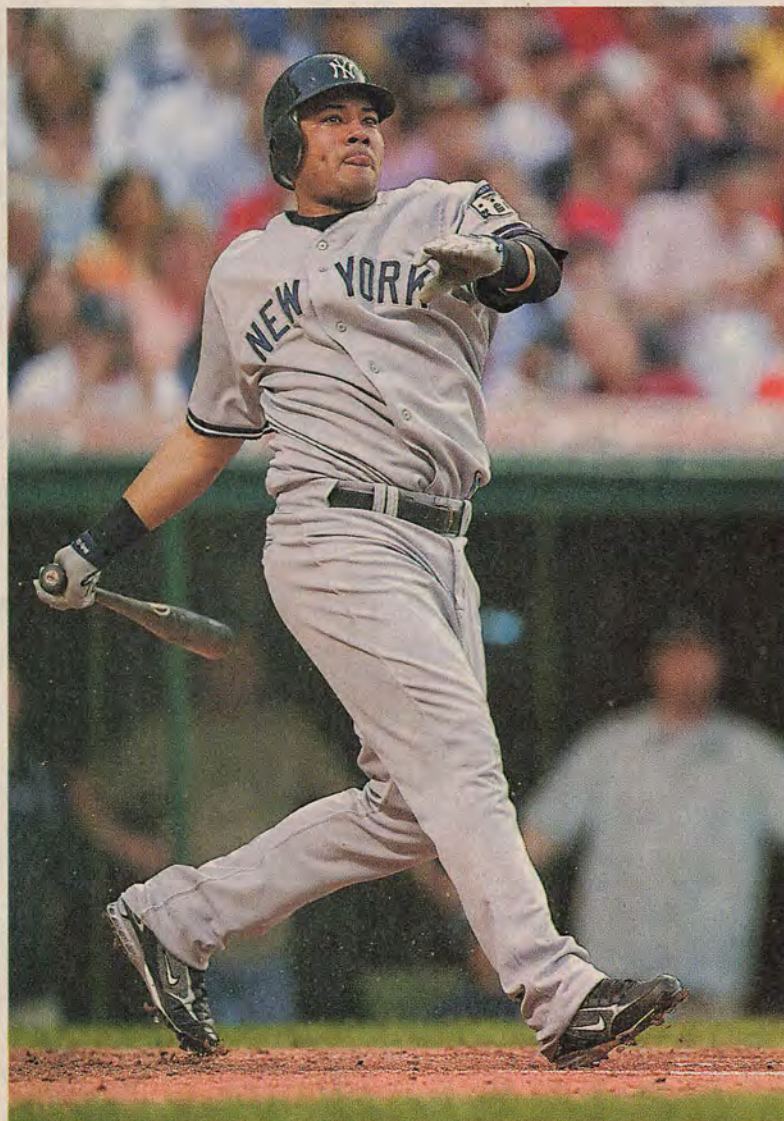
"Are you saying we're old?" Damon wonders. Not necessarily, of course. Just experienced and, with experience, perhaps jaded to the everyday joys of life as a baseball player. That's where Cano and Cabrera can help. "It's really cool playing with

those guys because of the energy they bring every night," Damon says. "That rubs off on older guys."

But if the Yankees needed only youth and energy, they could sign Up With People. No, this bunch needs the unique on-field contributions that Cano and Cabrera offer, in addition to their live-wire act in the locker room. For the past five months, there has been no shortage

of ink spilled over the state of the Yankees' pitching rotation and the roles of a trio of youngsters (early-20s pitchers Ian Kennedy, Phil Hughes and Joba Chamberlain). Nor has there been a shortage of Hank Steinbrenner's breath wasted on the topic.

But don't be fooled. The Yankees' pitching situation is not all that bad and will improve as the youngsters either settle in or are sent back to the minors. The offense, though, has been troubling. The lineup led the majors in runs last year but was



Don't let Cabrera's age or his spot in the order fool you. He's producing like a middle-of-the-order veteran.

tied for 14th entering the week. Advanced age has already led to injuries: Jeter and Rodriguez have missed time with quadriceps pain (A-Rod is now on the disabled list), and persistent shoulder problems forced Posada to the D.L. for the first time in his career. There's bound to be attrition in the lineup this year. The logical way to combat that is with Cano and Cabrera.

These are the young guys who matter most on this team, the ones who truly hold Steinbrenner the Younger's blood pressure cuff in their hands. "You don't hear quite as much about them as you do the pitchers," says Buck Martinez, baseball analyst for XM radio and TBS broadcasting. "There's no question, a major league clubhouse can get stale when you have too many veterans, and guys like that can prevent that from happening. Whenever anyone on that team mentions those two guys to me, they light up with a smile. They're not batting in the middle of the lineup, which is why they get overlooked. But they bring elements like

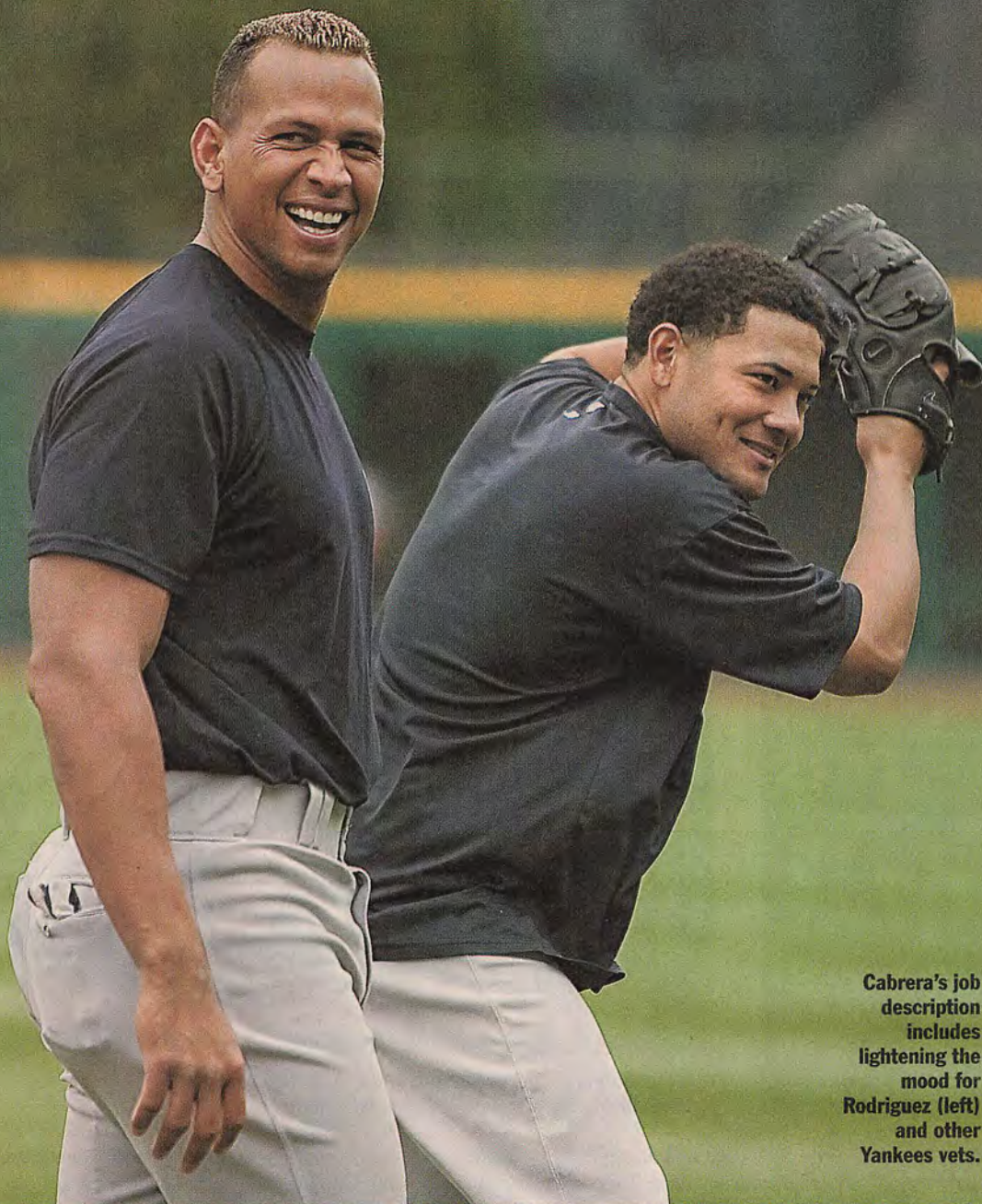
defense and speed and energy that the Yankees would not have otherwise. They can't win without them."

Cabrera is sitting with White Sox pitcher Octavio Dotel in the Chicago dugout, nearly two hours before a midweek game at U.S. Cellular Field. A steady rain has forced the cancellation of batting practice, missed time that Cano and his slump can't afford. He is standing in front of Dotel and Cabrera, holding his bat, showing his form. He's trying to keep his hands back. He is focused on keeping his hips square, his front foot pointed at the pitcher as he strides. He slides his hands forward, moving his bat slowly through the strike zone. Cano has sought out hitting coach Kevin Long for video study and extra work in the batting cage. Long says Cano is "drifting," pulling out of his stance too early, which prevents him from making solid contact.

He doesn't appear to be drifting here in the dugout. Cano looks to Dotel and Cabrera, as if they might have an answer to his troubles in what they've just seen. Nope. He shrugs about it later. "It's just a slump—I will come around," he says.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. The Yankees broke protocol this offseason and gave Cano a four-year, \$30 million contract, a sign of the team's faith in him. After a searing spring in which he hit .446, this looked like the year Cano would put all aspects of his offensive game—his ability to hit for average (Martinez says he could win a batting title), his patience (Long says it's the most improved part of his approach) and his power (Yankees first base coach Tony Pena says Cano can hit 35 homers a year)—together. Last year, Cano got off to a slow start, but he hit .343 in the second half. He vowed to be more consistent this year.

From manager Joe Girardi's perspective, Cano has been swinging the same way he was in the spring. It's luck that has failed him. "I don't see him



Cabrera's job description includes lightening the mood for Rodriguez (left) and other Yankees vets.

doing a whole lot different," Girardi says. "What I see is the line drives that were falling in the spring, they're catching now."

Despite the bottoming out at the plate, Cano remains upbeat. "That's the thing about this guy, and Cabrera, too," Pena says. "You have to watch them every day to see it. The thing is, they can play bad one night, then they can come in the next day and be smiling and joking around. They just go out and play the game, they don't care about yesterday. They are excited about the next game. It's fun to be around that."

Though Cano has struggled, it has been plenty of fun to be around Cabrera lately. Cabrera has maintained a sentimental spot in the hearts of Yankees fans ever since his game-saving, over-the-fence catch of a Manny Ramirez drive at Yankee

'You watch—these guys have a chance to be great. In a couple of years, the team is going to be built around them.'

—Yankees first base coach Tony Pena

Stadium in June 2006. But whether Cabrera's instincts and rocket arm could overcome his lack of pure speed in center remained a question, as did his offense. Thus, for the second straight offseason, Cabrera sat home in the Dominican Republic, following trade rumors that featured his name. Two years ago, Cabrera was shopped for relief help. Last winter, he was one of the key components of a deal that would have brought Johan Santana to the Bronx. Instead, the Yankees backed off—not so

Damon's and Matsui's to follow next year. As those stars fade, this pair figures to mature and play heavily in the Yankees' future.

"You watch," Pena says. "These guys have a chance to be great. In a couple of years, you'll see, the team is going to be built around them."

For now, it's their duty to play well, fill the gaps around the veterans and inject a little life. Even if the hitting stroke isn't there, Cano says, his job is this: "Keep smiling, you know?" **SN**

much because they feared giving up Cabrera but because they did not want to lose any of their young pitchers.

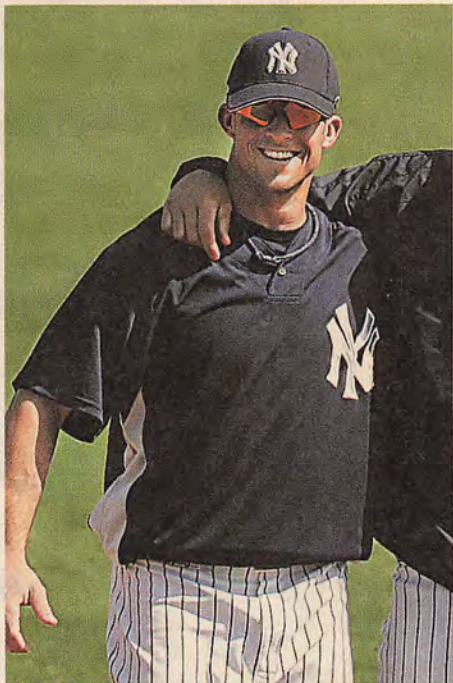
"He'd be tough to let go because of all the little things he can do to make life difficult for the other team," says one scout. "He can be a real pain in the ass, working the count, taking pitches, forcing pitchers to make mistakes. He's a lot like Nick Swisher—they're both switch hitters—but with more speed and better defense."

In the wake of the Santana trade rumors, Cabrera showed up at spring training about 10 pounds lighter. He had a long talk with Girardi in late February and entered the season with the understanding that, though he would be the everyday center fielder to start the year, he was not guaranteed the job. That probably has changed. Cabrera has, so far, knocked off nearly every item on his checklist for improvement. He is showing more power and is tied for the team lead with five home runs. He is being more patient, with an on-base percentage of .363. He has been good on the basepaths, with three steals in three attempts and 15 runs scored. Still lacking: improvement from the right side, where he's hitting just .207.

If Cabrera continues to improve, Girardi might soon be forced to use him as his leadoff man more often—Cabrera leads off only when Damon rests. And Cano, when he does find his missing stroke, could toy with the No. 3 spot in the lineup, where Girardi occasionally put him in the spring. The contracts of Giambi and Abreu are up this winter, with

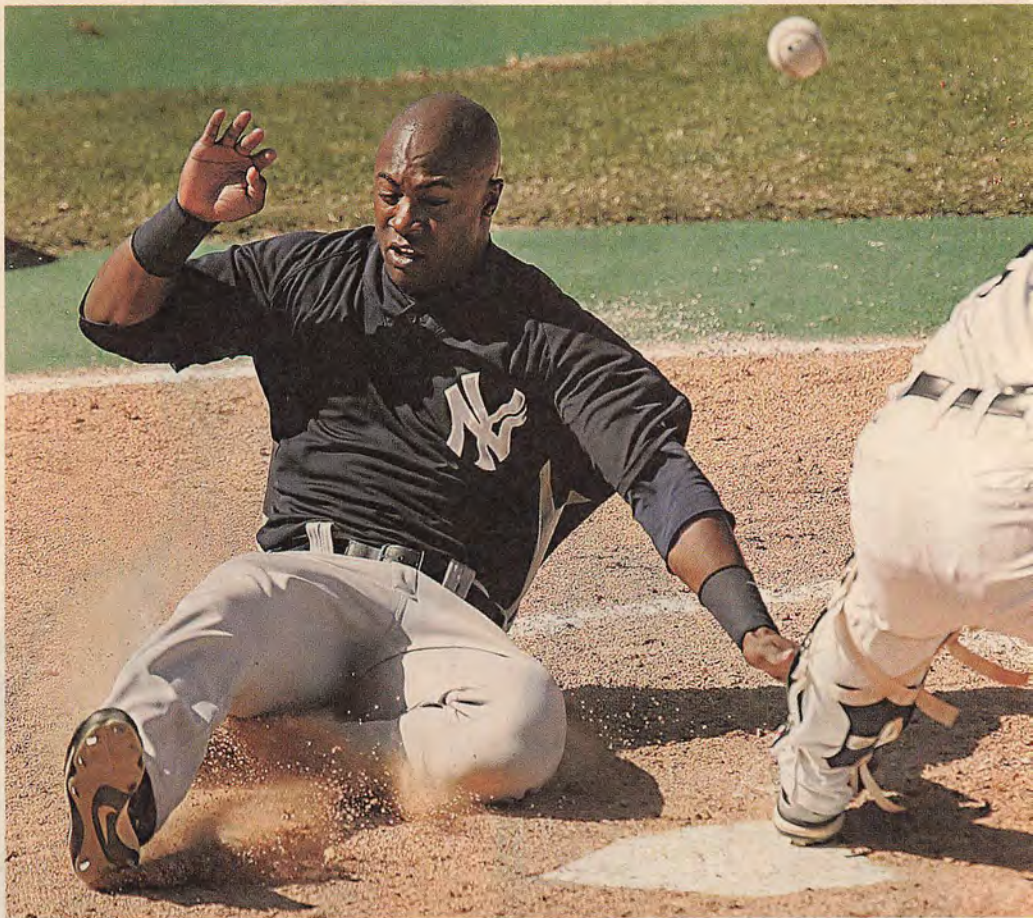
Bronx-bound?

In the next two years, the Yankees will see some hefty contracts come off their books, including those of outfielders Hideki Matsui, Johnny Damon and Bobby Abreu. There's always the chance that the Yankees will fill the void with splashy trades or big-money free agents, but if the organization chooses to continue building with youth, these are some names to watch.



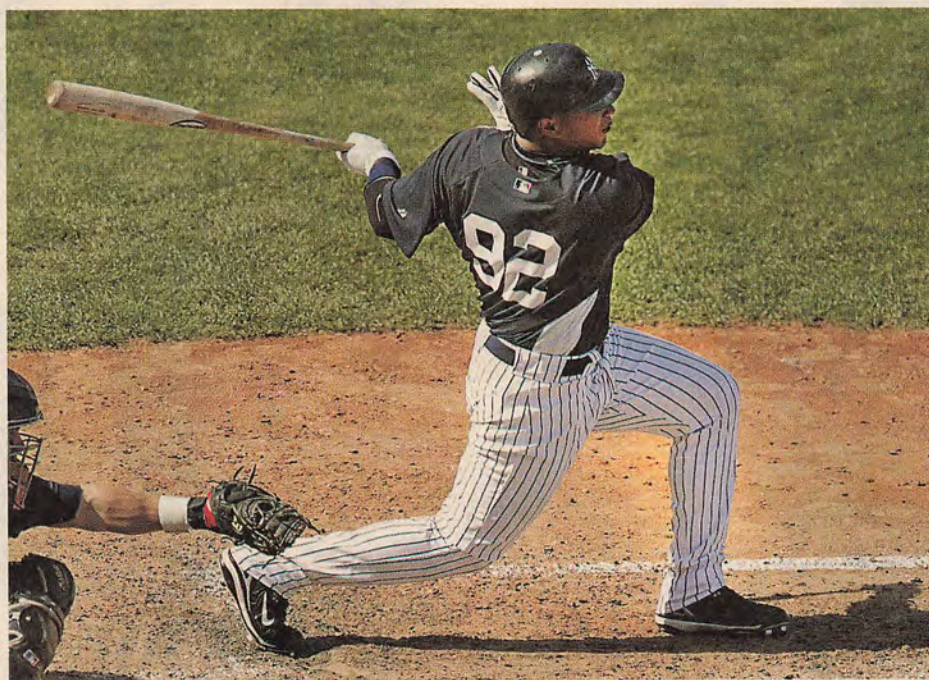
■ Brett Gardner, OF

Gardner, 24, can cover a lot of ground in center field. He does the kinds of things that have marked the Yankees' success—working the count and putting up a high on-base percentage. He adds a dimension the Yankees aren't accustomed to: speed. He's hitting .303 at Class AAA and is ready for the big club.



■ Austin Jackson, OF

The Yankees are eagerly watching Jackson's development this year. He took major strides in 2007 and now, at 21, seems to be putting his offense together at Class AA, where he's batting .267.



■ Jose Tabata, OF

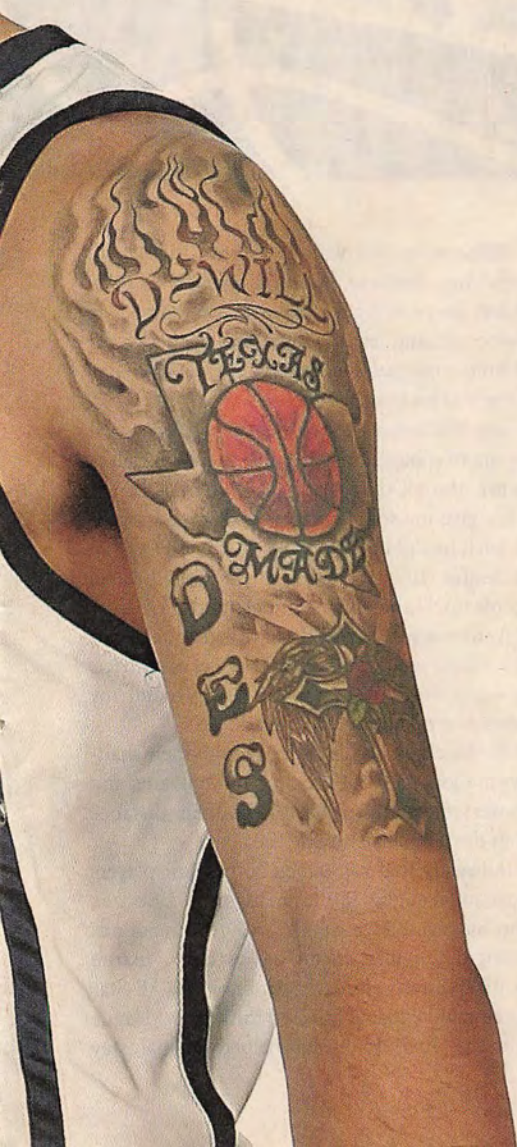
Considered the team's top prospect, Tabata has been slowed by injuries and served a three-game suspension for leaving a game early. He has struggled early in the season, batting just .198 at Class AA. Tabata has promise, but at 19, he needs more time.



POWERPOINT

Put Carlos Boozer and Deron Williams together and you've got one heck of a presentation *By Steve Greenberg*

It's somewhere between a *bang* and a *squish*, the awful sound that's created by a 3-point shot that hits the backboard and only the backboard. Paul Millsap would rather hear that sound in his sleep than suffer the indignity of what's coming next. "You got NO aim with that!" shouts Deron Williams, who is walking onto the Utah Jazz practice court, still hiking up his shorts. Millsap, a second-year power forward who is several feet outside his range, gives it another go: a i r b a i i



Williams doesn't usually work alone, but he sometimes stands that way.



Ronnie Brewer grabs the rock and starts to dribble out for his own warmup shot, but Williams orders him to a halt: "Ball!" the 23-year-old point guard demands, and Brewer dutifully obliges. Before Millsap can slink away, Williams fires it back out to him. Another miss. And another. And another, Williams shagging all the while. This will not end until Millsap drains one, which he does on his eighth attempt.

"Hey," Williams says on this March morning, eyeballing the regular-season stretch run and, of course, the playoffs. "He may have to make one of those for us someday."

The Lakers are in town the following night, and Ronny Turiaf is giving Carlos Boozer fits with his size, strength and aggressiveness. Boozer sets a high screen, pins Turiaf on his back and thunders down the lane, but Andrei Kirilenko swings the ball out to Brewer instead. "Come on, Andrei!" the 26-year-old Boozer roars. While a dismayed Kirilenko looks down at the floor, Boozer quickly circles around off the left shoulder, meets Brewer's pass on the other side of the lane, crashes to the goal and scores, drawing a foul on Turiaf. On the way to the foul line, Boozer stops and embraces Kirilenko.

The Lakers win the game, but that one play

speaks loudly to the onrushing excellence of the Jazz, who—like the Spurs with Tony Parker and Tim Duncan, the Hornets with Chris Paul and David West, and the Pistons with Chauncey Billups and Rasheed Wallace—are contending for a championship on the backbone of stellar leadership and sublime play from the point guard and power forward positions.

What Kobe Bryant is given credit for individually—making his teammates better—Williams and Boozer are doing with a don't-you-dare-overlook-them flourish.

"I don't think they're afraid of responsibility. They're willing to take responsibility win or lose," says Jazz general manager Kevin O'Connor. "That's not something you often see in young guys in this league."

Until they bring rings to Salt Lake City, Williams and Boozer never will rate with John Stockton and Karl Malone. Maybe Williams, who drives down John Stockton Drive a couple hundred times a year, would say that's obvious. Except that he wouldn't. His favorite point guard: Jason Kidd. His take on Jazz fans: "They didn't retire with John and Karl. They're hungry for a championship just like we are."

Williams studied with Stockton in the latter's hometown, Spokane, Wash., as a rookie in 2005. Boozer keeps in regular contact with Malone via phone calls and text messages. But neither of the all-time greats has ever laced 'em up as a tutor to the heir of his franchise throne.

Says Williams: "It was a great experience, coming out of college and being able to have a Hall of Famer, the all-time leading assist man in the NBA, give me some pointers and some insights on what he did in (Jerry Sloan's) offense to be so successful. The cuts he'd make, the way he'd set people up. He helped me understand it."

And Boozer: "Karl and I have a great relationship. I can't put a value on it. He gives me advice. He says, 'Don't worry about trying to fill my shoes. Just make your own mark.'"

But Stockton and Malone, though their shadows are long, are not mentors for Williams and Boozer; they mostly have kept their distance from the Jazz since leaving the team.

Indirectly, that has helped both young players move unabatedly into starring roles. Boozer, who averaged 21.1 points and 10.4 rebounds during the regular season, has become a fixture on the Western Conference's crowded All-Star roster, and Williams finished third in the league in assists (10.5). It also has helped the mainstay



Sloan move forward in the latter stages of his career. "It's like Jerry is reborn because of Carlos and Deron," says a team insider. "And I think Jerry needed it. No one can keep plugging and plugging without any hope of winning a championship."

Hornets point guard Paul has made an unmistakable move into the superstar realm, but Williams—whom the Jazz selected one pick ahead of Paul in the 2005 draft—has been only a step behind, if that. "My opinion is he's been the best guard in the league since the All-Star break," says Boozer. "And he's only in his third year. We have a hell of a tandem coming up in the next few years."

Boozer—who caught grief for leaving LeBron James' side as a free agent in 2004—has established himself as perhaps the most old-school, Malone-like power forward in the game. "He's an automatic double double," says Williams. "How can you not love a guy like that? He has great hands and great footwork for a big man and is one of the best-shooting big men from midrange. He can score from anywhere, put it on the floor. He can do everything."

But can the Jazz beat the Lakers? Can they win it all? It'll require more than a two-man show. It'll demand two men getting the very best out of everyone around them.

SN

PAST VS. PRESENT

Jeff Hornacek
played with—
starred with—John
Stockton and Karl
Malone. As a Jazz
consultant,
Hornacek is up
close and
personal with
Deron Williams and Carlos Boozer.



The difference from last year—a huge difference—is in Deron's decision making. When to shoot it, when to pass it. Jerry's giving him a lot of leeway this year as far as letting him call his own offense.

John was great at distributing the ball; he always knew when Karl was going to be open just for that split second. Deron and Carlos are on that same page, running that pick-and-roll and knowing where that little opening is to make that pass.

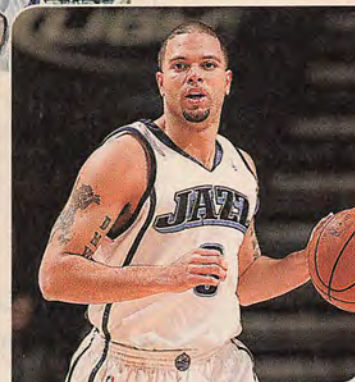
I think John was more of a scrapper than Deron. He was stronger than he looked. He grabbed, he threw elbows. Deron's more able to bump guys off him just through his sheer size. You can't cut him off; he just rides you out of the way until he gets where he wants.

I don't know if it's possible for Carlos to be as strong as Karl. I remember when I first got here, I got knocked down in a game. Karl pulled me up with his finger. I thought, "Holy crap, this guy is strong." But Carlos and Karl are similar in that they have such great body control. When they do roll down the lane, you don't see them get called for a lot of charges. They have the ability to maneuver around guys.

When we were playing, John, Karl and I would be in the back room when the other guys had the music going in the locker room. When Deron and Carlos come to play a game, they're focused like we were. The preparedness is very similar. They are ultimate professionals.



Stockton (top)
was small
but scrappy;
Williams uses
his size to his
advantage.



Just like Malone
(top) was, Boozer
is good at getting
around defenders
and to the rim.



TWO MORE FOR THE SHOW

The buzz around the playoffs is that the Hornets' duo of Chris Paul and David West is as good as anybody's *By Steve Greenberg*

The best point guard alive crossed his man over,

darted to his right alongside the foul line and flipped the ball toward the bottom right corner of the backboard square. It was a standard-issue Chris Paul lob pass—dead-on perfect—and Tyson Chandler roared down the baseline and flushed it, giving New Orleans a 35-34 lead in Game 1 against San Antonio.

"The Spurs being the Spurs, they responded with back-to-back 3s followed by—in what cried out as a "Get real, kiddies" moment—a four-point play by Paul's nemesis du jour, Bruce Bowen. The Hornets suddenly were down nine, not to mention hundreds of games of playoff experience and dozens of championship rings.

Get real, indeed. Eight minutes of game time later, Paul dribbled off a high screen, drew three defenders and zipped a pass to David West for a dunk that tied it at 54 early in the third quarter. Game on. Series on. The Hornets never trailed again.

The NBA's least-known and most routinely overlooked championship contender is wise beyond its years, and that is why the four-time champion Spurs are in danger of being bounced out of the playoffs by mid-May. If there is one player other than Kobe Bryant or LeBron James this postseason capable of dominating a series, it is Paul, a third-year pro who led the

league with 11.6 assists this season—and who's finished standing in line behind Steve Nash, Tony Parker and Chauncey Billups among the game's best point guards.

Paul does it with skill and, yes, with maturity and wisdom. "We're not going to pop champagne bottles or anything like that," he said after the Hornets eliminated the Mavericks in the first round. "This isn't like a fairy tale for us." Who does he think he is, Gregg Popovich?

A rung down the ladder in New Orleans—or maybe two, if you count NBA coach of the year Byron Scott—is West, a fifth-year power forward who scored 30 against the Spurs in Game 1 and made his first All-Star appearance this season. Paul speaks for the Hornets with blunt confidence. ("They may, they may not. It doesn't matter," he says when asked if the league's more established

teams respect the Hornets enough.) West does his thing more quietly, with a selflessness that has made him the most popular player in the locker room.

"Chris is the best point guard in the league. He has proven it," West says. "I'm probably at the bottom of the list of the best power forwards. I don't consider myself one of those guys who should be talked about with the best players in the league. I



There's no keeping Paul out of the lane—or from taking his place among the league's top point guards.



DAVID WEST'S TOP 5 PG/PF COMBOS

1. Chris Paul and David West, Hornets.

I'm always going pick us to be on top.

2. Deron Williams and Carlos Boozer, Jazz

They just play so well together and they're so solid.

3. Tony Parker and Tim Duncan, Spurs

I think Manu Ginobili jumps in there, and that makes it hard to judge the two guys.

4. Chauncey Billups and Rasheed Wallace, Pistons

It's their steadiness; they don't get rattled. They get down 16, 18 points, they're still in control of the game.

5. Steve Nash and Amare Stoudemire, Suns

Dealing with a guy who's looking to create like Nash does is tough, and it makes Amare's job really easy.



West may not get as much credit as his sidekick, but as the Spurs found out in Game 1, this Hornet can be a killer bee.

have so much more I have to do before I should be seen as being at the top of the food chain."

Ask West how much better playing with Paul makes him, though, and his humility bears a cutting edge (see chart). The same is true of all the Hornets, who have been crafted by Scott into one of the most balanced and dynamic teams in the league. The main ingredient is, of course, the point guard.

"You can say all you want about how quick he is and how great he shoots the ball, but his IQ is off

the charts," says Clippers coach Mike Dunleavy. "He makes everybody better. They run the pick-and-roll with (Peja) Stojakovic in the right corner, Chandler rolling to the rim for a lob-and-dunk, (Morris) Peterson on the other wing, West floating on the baseline. Paul makes the right decision every time."

The key to West's flourishing has been his readiness to shoot; against the Spurs in Game 1, he hit spot-up jumpers, step-backs and hooks with both hands, with no hesitation whatsoever. Perhaps he

doesn't belong in their midst, but he played like Tim Duncan, Kevin Garnett or Amare Stoudemire at their finest.

By comparison, the great Duncan, in one of the worst games of his career—five points on 1-of-9 shooting—looked completely unready for this second-round challenge.

We could be witnessing a changing of the guard (if not the power forward). To be sure, we are witnessing a Hornets team that more than belongs in the mix of contenders.

SN

The second season

It's all for one and one for all.
It's life one night, death
the next and—*always*—
a maniacal pursuit of the Cup.
It's playoff hockey.

By Chuck Gormley

The figures on the ice move in fast-forward. They move with more determination and purpose. The crunching of bodies is louder and more explosive. Reflexes are a little sharper, shots are a little quicker, and the puck moves like a laser from stick to stick.

It's called playoff hockey, and even the most casual NHL fan can recognize the difference between a regular-season game and one in the postseason. The 16-win quest for the Stanley Cup is a war of mind and muscle, the ultimate test of perseverance and self-sacrifice. The sprint to the finish line also is much more appealing and rewarding for players and coaches than the 82-game grind that got them there.

"To me, it's all about how much a player is willing to sacrifice to win," says defenseman Derian Hatcher, whose Flyers have survived two rounds and are ready to face off against the Penguins in the Eastern Conference finals. "You can't duplicate that in the regular season."

As sacrifices go, Hatcher was front and center for a doozy in Game 1 of the Flyers' Eastern Conference quarterfinal series against Washington, when teammate Patrick Thoresen hurled his body in front of a 100-mph slap shot by Capitals defenseman Mike Green. When

Clutching, grabbing, gouging, stomping, punching: All the dirty tricks of playoff hockey were in play when the Penguins and Rangers met in Game 3 of the Eastern Conference semifinals.



JULIE JACOBSON / AP



Thoresen slid in front of the howitzer, the puck hit him directly between the legs.

The force of the shot actually dented the protective cup Thoresen was wearing, and, for a few agonizing hours, there was concern surgery might be required to remove one of his testicles.

"I was in the room when he came off, and all I heard was him screaming," Flyers defenseman Randy Jones says. "He was in quite a bit of pain. I have nothing but respect for that guy."

Thoresen, who did not require surgery, missed one game and was back in the lineup four days later. "If I get the chance," Thoresen says, "I'll do it again."

It's that kind of warrior mentality that endears fans to the Stanley Cup playoffs. But players say there also are more fundamental differences that produce a better product in the postseason.

For one, there is the animosity that builds between teams playing each other every other night for two weeks. Unlike the regular season, when conference opponents can go months without facing each other, the playoff format creates a cauldron of hostility that spills over by the fifth, sixth and seventh games of any series.

"You hate each other even more when you're facing the same guys over and over again," says Flyers center Daniel Briere, who has scored more playoff points over the past three seasons than any other player. "When you see each other once a month, you forget about things that happened on the ice."

That familiarity breeds contempt even among players who are friends off the ice. "If you're in a vulnerable position, you might get a break during the regular season," Briere says. "But you won't in the playoffs. Somebody will finish you off."

Stars defenseman Stephane Robidas, who is averaging 24:58 minutes of ice time in the postseason, says the team with the most players

The playoff format creates a cauldron of hostility that spills over by the fifth, sixth and seventh games of any series.

playing out of character usually is the one left standing at the end of June.

"Even guys who usually don't finish their checks, they do in the playoffs," Robidas says. "They're blocking shots. It's all about the little details, and guys who are willing to sacrifice themselves, they're part of the successful teams. It's not about one, two, three or four guys. It's the whole lineup. You're trying whatever you can."

Few will argue that the play is far more physical than in the regular season. But whether that's because referees swallow their whistles during the playoffs is a topic of debate.

During the regular season, there was an average of 27.9 penalty minutes called each game. So far during the 2008 playoffs, that number has barely changed at 27.8 minutes. Yet players agree that referees are far more likely to overlook a penalty in the playoffs, especially in overtime.

"I think players are comfortable with the referees letting a little more go in the playoffs," said Flyers right winger Mike Knuble, who won a Stanley Cup as a rookie with the Red Wings in 1998. "I think consistency is what guys want. Call it any way you want to call it, just be consistent."

With every power play holding so much significance in each game, Penguins defenseman Brooks Orpik thinks execution on special teams is far more crucial in the playoffs.

"When you switch (opponents) pretty much every night during the regular season, you're constantly watching video and maybe at some point get a little too consumed with systems and stuff like that," Orpik says. "Now, you're so familiar with the guys you're going against, you just go out there and play."

Players say another major difference in playoff hockey is the importance of matching some of the NHL's top defenders against its most dangerous scorers.

In Round 1, Flyers coach John Stevens successfully pitted defenseman Kimmo Timonen against Capitals 65-goal scorer Alexander Ovechkin while Stars coach Dave Tippett relied on Robidas to help shut down Teemu Selanne and the defending Stanley

Darren McCarty and the Red Wings have done this before, so they knew what it would take to pound out a conference semifinal win over Colorado.





The lure of the Stanley Cup is what motivates Cheechoo (right)—and he'll go through the Stars' Brenden Morrow or anybody else to get it.

Cup champion Ducks.

"The gamesmanship steps up," says Flyers defenseman Jason Smith, whose last trip to the Cup Finals came two years ago with the Oilers.

"You can analyze a player's tendencies so much more than you can in the regular season because you see him every game and then you see him on tape after every game."

To familiarize his players with their upcoming opponent, Stevens asks each one to provide a scouting report on a player from the opposing team, then has the players share their findings in a team meeting.

But Sharks captain Joe Thornton believes no amount of game planning can match the combination of talent and grit needed to prevail over

the course of a seven-game series.

"Your best players have to step up and play their best hockey," Thornton says. "Every game means so much. You can never take a night off. You live and die every day, and you just want to live another day."

Knuble agrees, adding that the fear of losing in the playoffs is probably stronger than the thirst for winning. "That epic life-and-death thing is at the heart of everything," he says.

There also is the allure of hoisting one of sports' most revered and recognized trophies. Unlike many other championship trophies, the 34½-pound Stanley Cup carries an almost mythical significance.

"It's something you grow up watching and dreaming about, playing on the outdoor rinks," Sharks forward Jonathan Cheechoo says. "That's what makes it so special. Everyone at one time or another has fantasized about taking (the Cup) home. That's the thing that drives you."

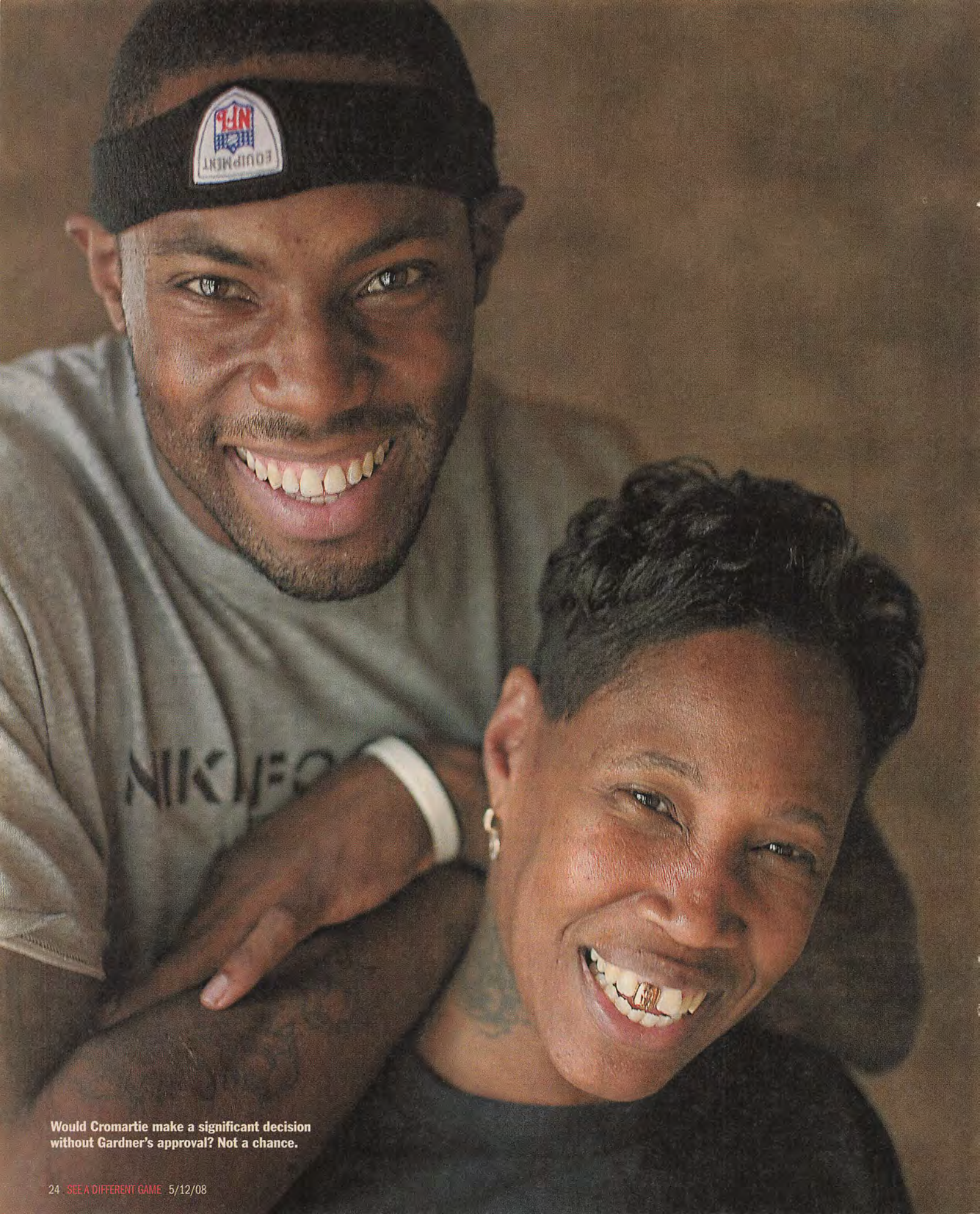
"You've got to get contributions from everyone. You can't be floating through a game. You have to contribute any way possible. Even if it's not the style of game you play, you have to play it. Both teams are trying to do the same. That's what makes it such good hockey."

The faster, sleeker more intense kind that happens every spring.

SN

Contributing: Tracey Myers

'That epic life-and-death thing is at the heart of everything.' —Flyers right winger Mike Knuble



Would Cromartie make a significant decision without Gardner's approval? Not a chance.

A mama's boy,

After all that life has thrown his way, San Diego's **Antonio Cromartie** has many fascinating stories to tell. But getting the NFL's most exciting cornerback to reveal the most important one is as hard as completing a pass in his area. *By Matt Crossman*

but his own man

Antonio Cromartie's life is full of compelling stories.

His athletic prowess, his rags-to-riches tale and the personal sacrifices he has made throughout his football career are all captivating. But there's much more—he has been touched by a scary car accident, life-threatening illnesses and a kidnapping at gunpoint. There is so much to pursue that honestly, I don't know where to start.

It's such a tough decision that I seek Cromartie's help. I ask him what one part of his life story absolutely must be in a profile of him. He thinks for a minute. He knows what it is—I can tell by the look on his face—but he doesn't answer. Not yet.

Instead, he scrounges around the island in his kitchen for a piece of paper. There isn't one within reach, so I tear a sheet from my notebook. He starts to write on it. I imagine he's writing an answer, but I'm not sure.

Impatient, I pepper him with suggestions.

I start with the reason we're talking in the first place. Cromartie, a cornerback for the Chargers, is arguably the best pure athlete in the game. He led the NFL with 10 interceptions last season. He picked off Peyton Manning three times in one game (and once more in the playoffs), had more picks than starts and made the Pro Bowl despite playing half the season as a backup. He scored touchdowns on a fumble recovery, an interception return and the return of a missed field goal attempt. Entering his

Cromartie is the most exciting cornerback in the league. All he needs to do to be the most exciting player, period, is touch the ball more.

third NFL season, Cromartie is the most exciting cornerback in the league. All he needs to do to be the most exciting player, period, is touch the ball more. "Probably one of the most gifted athletes I've ever seen," says Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis.

That's not a bad story right there. But because Cromartie says he considers his football career his chance to provide for his family (he has five children 3 years old and younger) not just now but far into the future, I have a fairly good idea that being an elite athlete is not the one thing I'd have to include in a story about him.

I ask anyway.

I'm right.

My plan going in was to build a story around the relationship between Cromartie and his mother, Cassandra Gardner.

The fact this story comes out the week of Mother's Day is not a coincidence. He proudly declares himself a mama's boy. Every important person in Cromartie's life knows the way to his heart and into his life goes through his mom. If she didn't approve of Jason Fletcher, he would not be Cromartie's agent. If she didn't approve of Rhonda Patterson, she would not be Cromartie's fiancée. Simple as that.

Streetwise, proud and boisterous, Gardner swallows a room whole. Cromartie looks like her. Both of their smiles roll slowly across their faces before exploding under their noses. Bizarre, their handwriting is almost identical. But their personalities are not similar. She is an extrovert. He is not. At least not usually. During a photo shoot, he leans over her shoulder and says, "I'm not going to do any crazy poses."

Then he gives her a wet willie.

They were not always close. When he was young, he was a grandma's boy. He grew close to his mom's mom because Gardner had three other kids, all younger than Antonio, to take care of. A car

accident when he was a teenager drew them together. Late one night, as he drove his 2000 Nissan Sentra (nickname: The Green Goblin) and talked to Gardner on the phone, he fell asleep at the wheel. He veered off the road, skinned a telephone pole and rammed down an embankment.

A few minutes later, a passerby woke him up. He wasn't seriously injured, but an ambulance took him to the hospital as a precaution. Gardner was worried sick about what could have happened. At the hospital, she blubbered. *He could have hit the phone pole, he could have been seriously injured, he could have ... she could have lost her baby!*



Cromartie and his mom look alike, smile alike and write alike, but he doesn't share her ebullient, room-swallowing personality.

"What y'all crying for?" he asked. He never knows what the big deal is.

His mom's response: "Boy, I could kill you! If the accident didn't, I could have!"

Since then, the two have talked three or four times a day.

I offer this as the one thing that has to be in my story: a boy and his mama.

Cromartie shoots me down. It's important, but it's not the one thing.



> This is ... Antonio Cromartie

Favorite store: Wal-Mart, because it sells everything. He says he buys everything but dog food there; he buys dog food at a pet store.

More evidence he's close to his mom: When shopping separately for new clothes to wear to his draft party in 2006, Cromartie and his mother bought outfits that were the same color.

Runs in the family: Cromartie's mom was a track star in high school. His brother played wide

receiver for Michigan State. And his cousin, Tennessee State cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, was a first-round pick by Arizona a couple of weeks ago.

The frugal footballer: His house in Atlanta had little furniture for the first year he owned it. "Cromartie might be the cheapest guy I know," says teammate Quentin Jammer. "He might be rich forever."

Almost famous: He did not know that the bad guy on the TV show *Terminator: The Sarah*

Connor Chronicles is named Cromartie.

The secret is out: The Chargers' defensive backs do Secret Santa. Cromartie drew Steve Gregory. Cromartie reportedly paid for Gregory's airfare, hotel and food for a trip to Honolulu for the Pro Bowl.

Words of wisdom: A Bible verse (Matthew 5:6) is painted on the face of the balcony in Cromartie's house: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

VICTIMIZED

**'Everything I thought
about him
was true.**

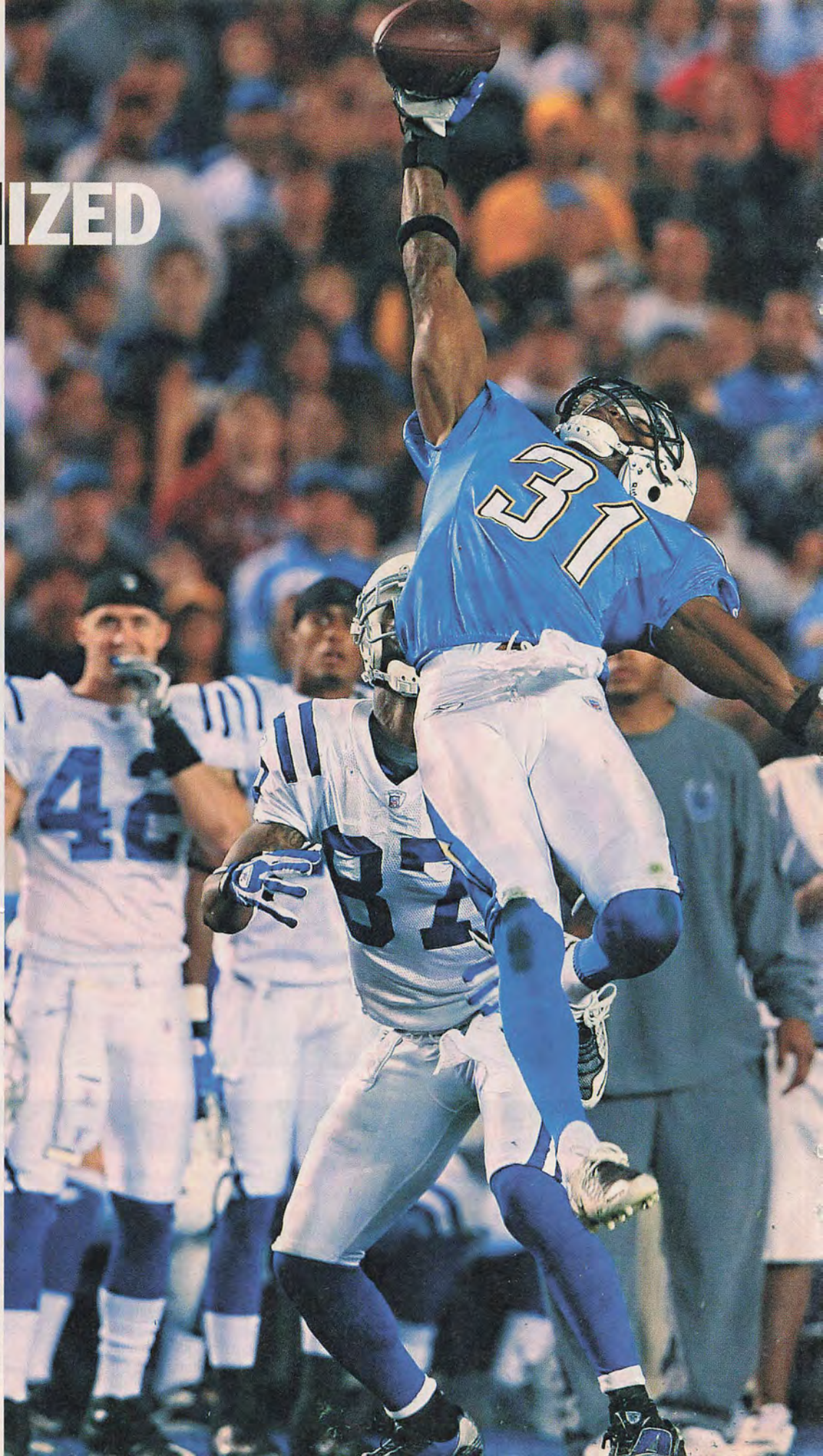
**He's a tremendous
athlete who just has
a feel around
the football.
You don't see
that kind of size
with so much
quickness and ability.**

**He's a very gifted
athlete with great
ball skills.'**

*—Colts quarterback
Peyton Manning,
who had four passes
intercepted by Cromartie
last season*

**Yes, Cromartie
came down with
this ball. Yes, it
was thrown by
Peyton Manning.
And no, it wasn't
Cromartie's most
impressive play
last season.**

KYLE TERADA / US PRESSWIRE





I'm dying to know what he's writing. With elite athlete out and mama's boy a no-go, I offer a headline idea: The Great Escape Artist. Considering the Green Goblin tale, he admits that's not bad. Almost every great story about Cromartie ends with an escape. He, his mother and his brother all survived life-threatening situations. His whole life story can be seen as an escape from the projects of Tallahassee, Fla.

His best friend, Ernest Williams—a former safety at Florida A&M—laughs as he tells an escape tale whose beginning I promised not to repeat. But the end is fair game. One Halloween night while they were in high school, Cromartie, Williams and a few of their friends were chased by an angry neighborhood mom driving a Mercedes. Why was she chasing them? That's the part I promised not to tell, but I can say, without reservation, that they deserved to be chased.

Cromartie and his pals peeled away in his 1991 blue pickup (nickname: Sonic Extreme because it was the same blue as Sonic the Hedgehog of the video game). The angry mom never caught them.

Cromartie has always been good at escaping on the field, too. He had two interception returns for touchdowns last year that were unbelievable for how many tackles he broke and moves he made. One was called back on a phantom holding call, but

that didn't diminish the extraordinary nature of the play.

The play he's most famous for came in a November 4, 2007, game against the Vikings on a missed field goal try. Standing deep in the end zone, he caught the ball over his shoulder, with his feet right up to, but not on, the end line. The catch itself was remarkable. He broke out of the end zone and sprinted down the right sideline, his

Almost every great story about Cromartie ends with an escape. He, his mother and his brother all survived life-threatening situations.

long strides chewing up yardage. It is the longest play in NFL history—109 yards. If the NFL took more precise measurements, this would have been called 109 yards, 2 feet and 11 inches.

And the whole thing almost never happened.

Cromartie had plans to leave Minnesota long before the game started. The only reason he stayed was because of an astounding escape by his mom.

According to Gardner and a Leon County Sheriff's Office report, on the Friday morning before the Sunday game, Gardner was at home in Tallahassee when her estranged husband, Willie Colson, broke through a window. "Bitch, I'm going to kill you, then kill myself," she says he told her.

Colson had a shotgun. She tried to fight him off, at one point grabbing the gun below the pump so he couldn't load the shells. "I'm straight from the 'hood, so you're not going to just take me," she says.

Colson eventually dragged her out of the house, the contents of her purse leaving a trail behind her to the still-open front door. He crammed her into her gray 2007 BMW and drove off, the police report says.

Gardner is wise and cunning and survived raising four kids alone with little money. This was something else entirely. But if anybody can survive on just her wits, it's Gardner. She says she gave no indication she had a cell phone tucked into the front of her pants. When he momentarily left the car, she says she called her sister.

Her sister called the police.

Colson soon climbed back into the car and took off again.

Meanwhile, Cromartie was all the way across the country in San Diego. He first learned of the situation via a phone call as he sat on the team bus on the way to the airport. With no other option, he boarded the plane for Minnesota. He did not plan to stay there. "I told my coaches, 'I'm going to go home. I don't care about this game,'" he says. He bought a ticket for a late-night flight from Minnesota to Florida.

Back in Tallahassee, the situation was chaotic, according to the police report. The violence had

Operation intercept: 10 is a magic number

Antonio Cromartie became the seventh player this decade—but only the ninth in the past 20 NFL seasons—to collect 10 interceptions in the regular season. In the 1990s, only one player did it—Bears rookie Mark Carrier in 1990. The next double-digit interception season came 11 years later, when Tampa Bay's Ronde Barber and Cleveland's Anthony Henry each picked off 10 passes.

Like Cromartie, Henry spent much of the year as a backup, starting just two games. In the past two decades, Cromartie and Henry are the only players with double-digit interceptions and single-digit starts.

Year	Name	Team	G/GS	Int.	TD
1988	Scott Case	Falcons	16/15	10	0
1990	Mark Carrier	Bears	16/16	10	0
2001	Ronde Barber	Bucs	16/16	10	1
	Anthony Henry	Browns	16/2	10	1
2005	Ty Law	Jets	16/16	10	1
	Deltha O'Neal	Bengals	15/14	10	0
2006	Champ Bailey	Broncos	16/16	10	1
	Asante Samuel	Patriots	15/15	10	0
2007	Antonio Cromartie	Chargers	16/8	10	1

The last player to surpass 10 interceptions in a season was Dallas' Everson Walls, with 11 in 1981.



Cromartie became a YouTube legend with his 109-yard return, but that slice of heaven came after a weekend of hell.

Cromartie first learned of the kidnapping via a phone call as he sat on the team bus on the way to the airport.

abated, but Gardner was still being held against her will. Colson also had a cell phone, and after a series of conversations with multiple people, the police eventually got involved. She says when a detective asked if she was safe, she said yes in such a way that she hoped he knew she meant no. The detective said he needed to see her at the police station. Apparently thinking this was his chance to get out of the situation, Colson freed Gardner and fled.

Shortly thereafter, Cromartie landed in Minnesota. Though his mom was safe by that time, he still wanted to leave. His coaches would have been fine with that. "I was going to leave anyway, if they didn't say it was all right," he says.

His mom and agent talked him out of it. Quentin Jammer, his teammate and close friend, tried to comfort him. "I was just trying to calm him down," Jammer says. "He was ready to kill somebody."

On the night before Cromartie scored the longest touchdown in NFL history, Colson turned himself in to police. The jury selection for his trial on charges of kidnapping and burglary in which an assault occurred was scheduled to start Monday, May 5. He has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyer says he denies the charges. The trial will be another difficult chapter in Gardner's life. Colson's attorney has attacked her credibility, pointing to a 2006 conviction for unemployment compensation fraud. "I don't have anything to hide," Gardner says. "If I have to get on the stand and explain it, I don't have a problem with that. I'm no goody-goody, but I always tried to raise my kids right."

Somehow, Cromartie played through overwhelming emotions. "When I'm on the football field, everything's blocked out," he says. "I feel like it's my comfort zone."

So how about that, Antonio? The Great Escape Artist—it would work for you and your mom.

Strike 3. But that doesn't mean I'm out.

See where Antonio Cromartie ranks among AFC cornerbacks in the first installment of our weekly positional ratings on page 48.

What's he writing, *War and Peace*?

I try another angle. Cromartie is proud of what he has accomplished considering where he came from—he's wealthy, he's famous, he's a father and he's engaged to a beautiful attorney. That's it. I'll write a rise-from-a-bad-situation story. It's a cliché, but in Cromartie's case it also happens to be true.

After all, I'm waiting for his answer in his seven-bedroom house near Atlanta. I'm guessing there are more bedrooms here than in several of his childhood homes combined. In the garage, there is a 2008 Dodge Charger (nickname: Black

His steely work ethic makes it even clearer: **Advantage, Cromartie**

Antonio Cromartie has three advantages over most wide receivers in the league: At 6-2, 203, the San Diego cornerback is bigger—or just as big. He's faster. And he's a better athlete.

On top of that, Cromartie has a stellar work ethic. "He's the first guy I've ever seen as a rookie to be the first guy in and the last guy out studying film," says teammate and fellow cornerback Quentin Jammer. "He studies more than a lot of quarterbacks."

As dazzling as he is athletically, Cromartie still pushes himself. When he was recovering from knee surgery in college, he did all of his rehab twice—once with a trainer, then at home. Though many trainers would advise against that, he returned to football drills far sooner than expected.

Cromartie's teammates and coaches at all levels of his career marvel at his diligence. "You don't have to tell him to pick it up," says Chargers defensive backs coach Kevin Ross, who played a crucial role in Cromartie's development last season, especially in teaching him how to study game film. "If anything, you have to tell him to slow down."

And it's not just people who know him who rave about him. Darren Woodson, former Dallas safety and now an analyst for ESPN, says of Cromartie: "I don't know if there's a better athlete I've seen. His athletic skill set is off the chart." Woodson played for the Cowboys for 12 seasons, including five with Deion Sanders, who is generally considered the greatest cornerback ever.

As a 5-10 sixth-grader, so skinny and

with such long arms that all these years later his mom still laughs when she describes him, Cromartie could dunk a basketball. Kyle Rice, who was an assistant coach of Cromartie's high school football team in Florida (and is now head coach there), says Cromartie played running back, wide receiver, quarterback, cornerback and safety and returned kicks. "He probably could have kicked, too, but we had a pretty good kicker," Rice says.

With another year to improve his footwork and learn about the opposition, Cromartie should be even better in 2008—though the numbers probably won't show it. Cromartie's emergence last season likely means his interception total will drop because teams will avoid him. That can prove frustrating, considering Cromartie sets specific goals for himself before each season. He has said he could reach 15 interceptions, which seems highly unlikely now that offenses know what he's capable of. It will be important for Cromartie not to force plays.

He says he ran a blistering 4.23 40-yard dash before tearing his ACL while in college. "To tell the truth, I could probably run faster than that, but I don't have to test for it," says Cromartie, who recorded a post-ACL 4.37 at the 2006 Combine.

Cromartie's speed means he can turn and run with every wide receiver in the league, and it allows him to catch up if he bites on a move. Several in the NFL described him as a wide receiver playing defensive back, and the Chargers have discussed using him on offense, though they have yet to do so.

You want discipline? Somewhere in Tallahassee, there is an extension cord with butt prints on it.



Cromartie sees his mom often and talks to her on the phone several times every day.

ANTONIO CROMARTIE	
#81	
Season: 1994	
Age:	10
Ht:	4'11
Wt:	83 lbs
Hometown:	TALLAHASSEE
Position:	CORNERBACK/P
Team:	BRONCOS
Coach:	JOE GOEKE
League:	FLAG PEE WEE

Cromartie apparently played two positions as a 10-year-old. He might play more than one this year—he could also line up as a receiver.



Knight) that crushes his previous cars in every conceivable way save the nickname.

Let's pick up the thread of Cromartie's difficult childhood at age 3. He already had a younger sister and a younger brother, and Gardner was carrying her fourth child. His brother T.J., a former wide receiver at Michigan State, contracted spinal meningitis at 18 months. T.J. spent a month and a half in the hospital. Gardner spent all of her time caring for him.

As the children grew, Gardner struggled to make ends meet. The family moved from place to place, 11 in all. Gardner often could not afford to pay the electric bill, so the power was cut off several times a year. The stories the family tells from these times, though, are told with laughter, even the ones that involve Gardner's discipline. Somewhere in Tallahassee, there is an extension cord with butt prints on it.

When Cromartie was in sixth grade, his grades slipped. Gardner forced him to pack up his football uniform, give it to his coach and tell him he couldn't play because he was doing poorly in school. "The talent you have all day long," she told her son. "But talent without education is nothing."

Cromartie never became an "A" student, but he never again did so poorly that his mom wouldn't let him play.

One night when Cromartie was a high school sophomore, Gardner sat on the edge of her bed with two bills, one for electricity, the other for Antonio's private high school. She could pay only one. She prayed aloud, asking God what she should do. She eventually went to bed, opting to make a decision in the morning. After she woke up, Cromartie made it for her, telling her he wanted to transfer to a public school.

A prayer had been answered.

The lights would stay on.

Months later, he told her he had overheard her praying.

There was never any real chance Cromartie would not go to Florida State, the school that dominates the town in which he grew up. He had dreamed of playing there since age 4 or 5, though then he called it "Porida Tate" as he played ball in the house, often running smack into the TV. It should come as no surprise that Gardner grilled Bobby Bowden right in her own living room. She wanted to make sure the legendary coach would be there throughout her son's collegiate career; she didn't want Cromartie to have to win over another set of coaches.

Though Cromartie is one of the best athletes to ever play for Florida State—he also ran track—he did not start as a freshman or sophomore. His con-

stant fighting with teammates likely is the reason why. Cromartie smiles and laughs easily, and he has always been that way. But in high school and the first few years of college, he had anger problems. He says he got in two fights a month his freshman year at Florida State.

During a track meet at FSU, the guy behind him tried three times to knock him off the track. Fed up, Cromartie turned around and punched him in the face—during the race. Cromartie got kicked out of the meet. He had nothing to do, so he took the team van to the mall to get a bite to eat.

He can't pinpoint now what he was so angry about. He went to anger management counseling but gave up on that to face the problem himself. "I just had an attitude problem, for real. Very bad," he says. "You could say one thing to me, and it would be over."

He didn't have an "aha!" moment that turned his life around, no stirring speech from a friend or coach. He came to the slow realization that a bad attitude could cost him his dream of playing in the NFL.

As it turned out, that dream came true much earlier than anyone expected.

I look across the kitchen island at him. How about the local boy makes good—is that the answer?

Of course not.

The draft story. It has to be the draft story. No Antonio Cromartie story would be complete without it. This much I know, regardless of whether he agrees.

Heading into his junior year—the 2005 season—he blew out his ACL. Surgery followed, and he missed the regular season before working tirelessly in hopes of playing in the Orange Bowl. The effort and work he put in to get healthy—even if he wasn't allowed to play in the bowl game—was nothing short of amazing. But it's only the slightest fraction as interesting as what followed.

In the first week of January 2006, his phone rang.

This family gets a lot of bad phone calls.

This was another.

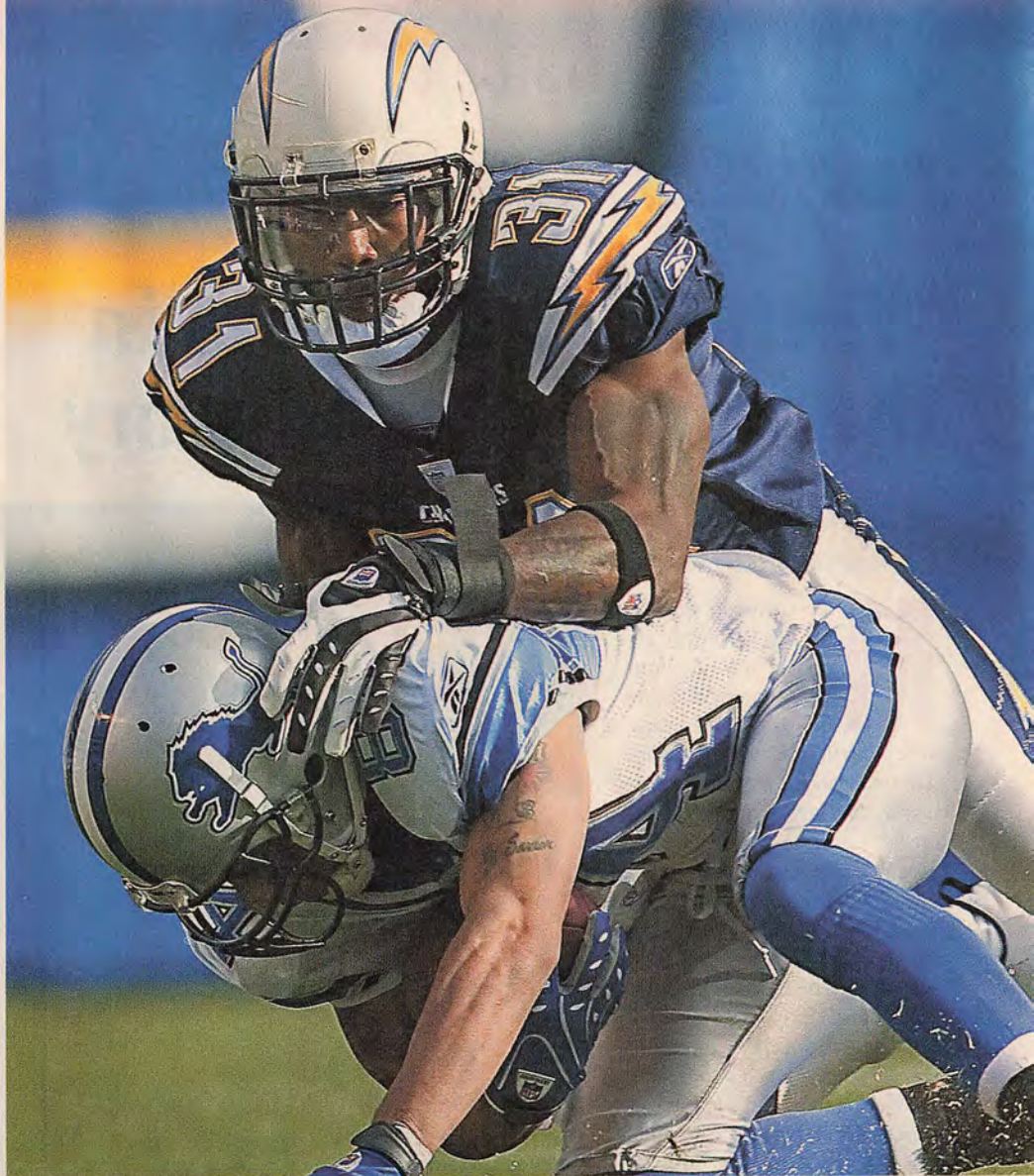
Gardner had breast cancer.

She did not have health insurance and would need money for treatment. Cromartie decided immediately to give up on college and go into the NFL draft after starting only one game in his first two seasons and missing his entire junior season. I ask him 15 ways from Sunday, trying to get him to tell a dramatic version of the story. But every time, he tells it the same. He got a phone call, his mom was sick, the family needed money, he decided to go pro. That's it. And he usually leaves out the middle two parts.

Making this story more remarkable: Though he had been told he would likely go in the fifth round, he went in the first, 19th overall. Teams that were leery of him because of his knee problems were blown away by his pro day.

Going pro is the only big decision he has ever made without consulting Gardner. Not only did Gardner, who is now healthy, have no input, she tried to talk him out of leaving Florida State. But Cromartie knew he would get drafted and knew there was a big paycheck coming. He knew he could get a bigger paycheck if he stayed in school and proved his worth more definitively, but he didn't need money next year—he needed it now.

His grandmother, the one with whom he is very close, also had health issues at the time. There was no way he was going to let his family



With his ridiculous body and speed, Cromartie can mix it up with the biggest, baddest receivers and suffocate the little ones.

descend into the kind of financial strife from which it had started to emerge.

This is one of many situations in his life that would render most young men helplessly confused, but he handled it with calm confidence. While all of this was going on, he also had recently become a father for the first time. He has felt the burden of being the man of the house

since long before a young boy should. One of his nicknames in his inner circle is "Grandpa." He is a very old 24, so new obstacles don't worry him. "That's the way he looks at things," says Williams. "He puts a lot of pressure on himself. He feels like he can do it, he can do anything."

Anything but answer my question.

Finally, Cromartie looks up. He turns the paper over to me. In careful penmanship, he has written his children's names and ages. He doesn't want his children, who live with their mothers in Texas, Georgia and Florida, to have to overcome a tough childhood. He doesn't want them to be escape artists. He wants them to have nothing to escape from. Here's what a profile about him has to say: "I want to teach them not to make the decisions I did."

His mom beams when I tell her this the next day.

SN

7month - Antonio Cromartie Jr.

Antonio Cromartie

Does your handwriting look this much like your mom's? That's Cromartie's writing above, Gardner's on the right.

While we're giving Mike Cameron a hero's welcome, maybe we should remember why he was gone: He broke the rules.

When the truth gets in the way of a good story

By Sean Deveney

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

Mike Cameron was, for the first time since late March, in his uniform, sitting among his fellow Brewers. He had cause to be giddy. It was, for him, opening day. He'd spent the past month serving a 25-game suspension, and finally, Cameron was eligible to play. "It's over and done with," he said of the suspension. "I'm excited to get a chance to play baseball so you guys, after today, can write something else beside my name besides that."

Thing is, us guys in the media haven't written much about what, exactly, Cameron did. He was suspended for using banned stimulants, but we don't want to make that part of the story. What us guys have written has been extraordinarily schlocky and sympathetic, the tale of Cameron's ordeal and redemption. In reading about the "pain" of Cameron's suspension, you'd be tempted to think he was emerging, falsely imprisoned, from a 10-year sentence in a medieval dungeon. One story even mentioned that, during his stint in the minors—which lasted four games—Cameron stayed in a \$100-per-night hotel. The horror!

In fact, Cameron mostly spent the time away from Milwaukee (average April high temperature: 54) taking extra batting practice in Phoenix (average April high temperature: 84). And all this was his fault. The suspension would have been avoided if he had not tested positive for banned stimulants. To mention that, though, doesn't fit with the hero narrative. "It was tough mentally," Cameron says. "Knowing that I was physically and mentally well



There was an awful lot of writing about Cameron's return—but not enough talk about why he was gone.

and having to shut it down, that was tough."

Perhaps it was tough mentally, but when he stepped out of the torture chamber of his suspension, Cameron went 3-for-5 in his debut. He was feted. He'd nudged awake the slumbering Brewers

offense. He could now be judged not for the month he missed but for the five months ahead.

Indeed, Cameron figures to be a factor for the Brewers after moving over as a free agent from the Padres last year. Manager Ned Yost immediately plugged him into the No. 2 hole. Despite Cameron's prodigious strikeout totals, that makes some sense, based on his speed, decent on-base percentage and power. Defensively, he has already helped by allowing the move of center fielder Bill Hall to third base and Ryan Braun to left field. That has

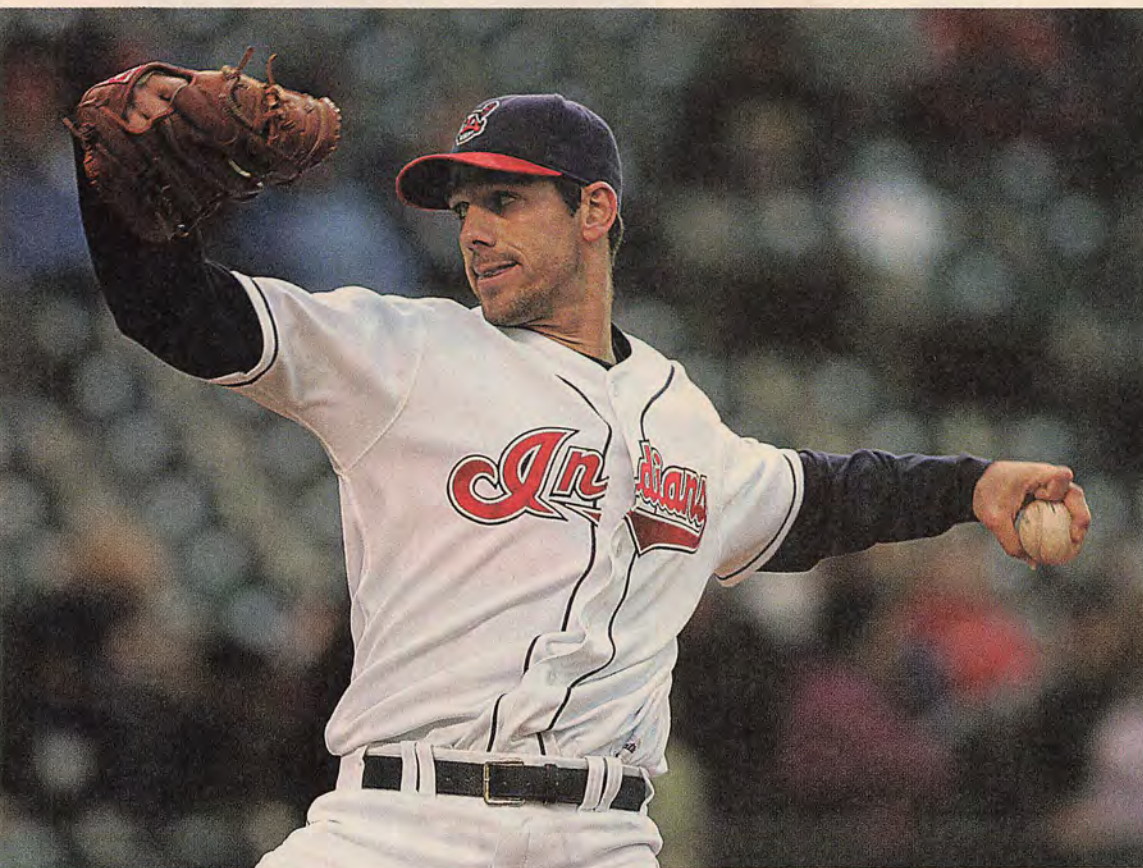
made the Brewers just about average defensively, after being one of the worst defensive teams last year.

Cameron is a good, levelheaded guy. He is active in the community and personable with the media. In spring training, Padres shortstop Khalil Greene said, "He's someone that we'll miss. Everybody liked him. He has a good presence."

But a good nature and a willingness to give interviews should not obscure the fact that Cameron failed those tests last year. Stimulant abuse is every bit the problem in baseball that steroid/HGH abuse is—stimulants are addictive, and they're deadly. Cameron failed tests in July and September (MLB rules allow one failed stimulant test with no penalty). He asserted that the test results came from tainted supplements, but by last year, the league had instituted a policy of selling approved supplements to players through team trainers. Cameron should have gotten supplements that way. Besides, the odds of getting two tainted supplements within three months are pretty slim. If he knew he had tested positive in July, he should not have been taking supplements in September.

Cameron is a clubhouse leader, which should help the young Brewers survive the season's grind better than they did last season. If this team is humming in September, Cameron will be a big part of the story. But we should not simply give Cameron a pass because we like him.

Cameron might be lying about his stimulant use. Even assuming he is being truthful, assuming the positive tests came from some sort of tainted energy drink, he still committed a sin of stupidity. That reality—and the resulting suspension—is part of this story, too. **SN**



Better focus has led to far better results for Lee, who entered the week 5-0 with an 0.96 ERA.

Indians LHP **Cliff Lee** has been astounding, and he attributes his fast start to better focus after a miserable 2007 in which he went 5-8 with a 6.29 ERA, was demoted to Class AAA and was left off the playoff roster. On the mound, that focus has brought pinpoint command of his fastball. "He is putting it wherever he wants," says an A.L. scout. "He is keeping it down, putting it in places where you can't possibly get a good bat on it." Control has been an issue with Lee in the past—he sometimes got wild and would get too many pitches up and over the plate. He had walked 3.1 per 9 innings before this season and gave up 17 home runs in just 97½ innings last year. In his first five starts, Lee walked just two batters and got into a 3-0 count only twice. He didn't allow a home run until his fifth start, and that came after the Indians had built an 8-0 lead. ➤ Remember Cardinals 1B **Albert Pujols'** bum elbow, the one that will eventually require reconstructive surgery? The elbow will make Pujols an injury risk all season, but it has had little effect on him so far. He was batting .359 entering the week. He's getting the **Barry Bonds** treatment—he's on pace to approach 180 walks—but CF **Rick Ankiel** and 3B **Troy Glaus** have been making pitchers pay by driving in runs behind

INSIDE DISH

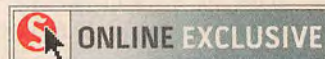
him. ➤ One of the few weaknesses of Red Sox closer RHP **Jonathan Papelbon** has been a slow delivery that allows runners to steal with ease. In the two previous seasons, Papelbon allowed seven steals in eight attempts. But he says he has been developing ways to keep hitters off-balance, including a slide step and an improved pickoff move. He nabbed Blue Jays pinch runner **John McDonald** last week. "I know when I come in that they're going to try to do whatever they can to score off me, and stealing bases has worked," Papelbon says. "I am trying to do a better job stopping that." ➤ The ACL tear suffered by Brewers RHP **Yovani Gallardo** hurts Milwaukee's playoff chances and could alter the team's long-term plans. The hope was that Gallardo—27-12 with a 2.51 ERA in the minors—would blossom into an ace, reducing the sting if free-agent RHP **Ben Sheets** walks in the offseason. If Gallardo is out for the year, Milwaukee might have to rethink that. ➤ After getting a load of Dodgers SS **Rafael Furcal's** newfound plate discipline—he's walking more than at any time in his career and is patiently waiting for pitches he can drive to the gaps—one N.L. scout noted, "He's playing like a free agent." Indeed, Furcal's contract is up this year.

speedreads

Once upon a time, team doctors diagnosed only players on their teams and players were not allowed to see doctors from other teams. But it's a nice trend that teams are more open to sharing the expertise of their doctors. Yankees catcher **Jorge Posada**, for example, saw two of the foremost shoulder specialists in the league: the Reds' Dr. Timothy Kremchek and the Mets' Dr. David Altchek.

A great quote about finances from Jose Canseco, who had a home foreclosed last week: "People think, 'OK, let's assume it is \$35 million.' People have to understand that \$35 million, you're paying the government 41 percent. That leaves you with about \$17 or \$18 million, not even." Poor fella.

A sore shoulder could force John Smoltz to the bullpen, which actually would be a good thing for Atlanta. Inexperience and inconsistency in the pen has cost them. They lost their first nine 1-run games this season. In the three full seasons Smoltz spent as the Braves' closer, they were 72-59 in 1-run games.



Submit a question to Sean Deveney, and look for the answer in his Friday mailbag at sportingnews.com.

Talkin' baseball with Junior

Ken Griffey is on the verge of becoming only the sixth player in major league history to hit 600 home runs, but as he told SPORTING NEWS' John Rawlings last week, numbers don't define him or his career.

SN: What do you like best about playing baseball?

GRIFFEY: The competition. You compete against the greatest players in the world. People think it's about the numbers. It's not about the numbers.

SN: Your family is obviously important to you. You play a lot of paintball together, right?

GRIFFEY: (Laughing.) Yes, we do. We really got into it about three years ago. I had to rig up a gun for my daughter because she couldn't hold the gun with an air canister on it. I had to build one so the canister fit into a backpack. It worked. What's that saying? The family that plays together stays together.

SN: You have a long list of accomplishments. What are you most proud of?

GRIFFEY: I don't think about it. I think about what I have to do today. What's most important right in front of me: win today's game.

SN: How would you describe yourself as a center fielder (where Griffey won 10 Gold Gloves before he switched to right field in 2007)?

GRIFFEY: I don't. I just go get everything.

SN: How did you become a great center fielder?

GRIFFEY: I learned from my dad. There are two sides of the ball. He said, "If you want to play three or four years, just be a hitter. If you want to play 10 or 15 years, learn to play the other side."

SN: What do you think when you see yourself making a great play on the highlight films?

GRIFFEY: Some of them are painful.

SN: You know what it's like being the son of a major league baseball player. Is it the same for Trey (who's 14, the oldest of Griffey's three children) as it was for you?

GRIFFEY: Not at all. There weren't nearly as many media outlets when I was a kid. It's everywhere. They try to get the ratings up by throwing jabs at you to see what will happen. People say all sorts of things. Then the kids go to school and they hear about it.

SN: Does Trey enjoy playing baseball?

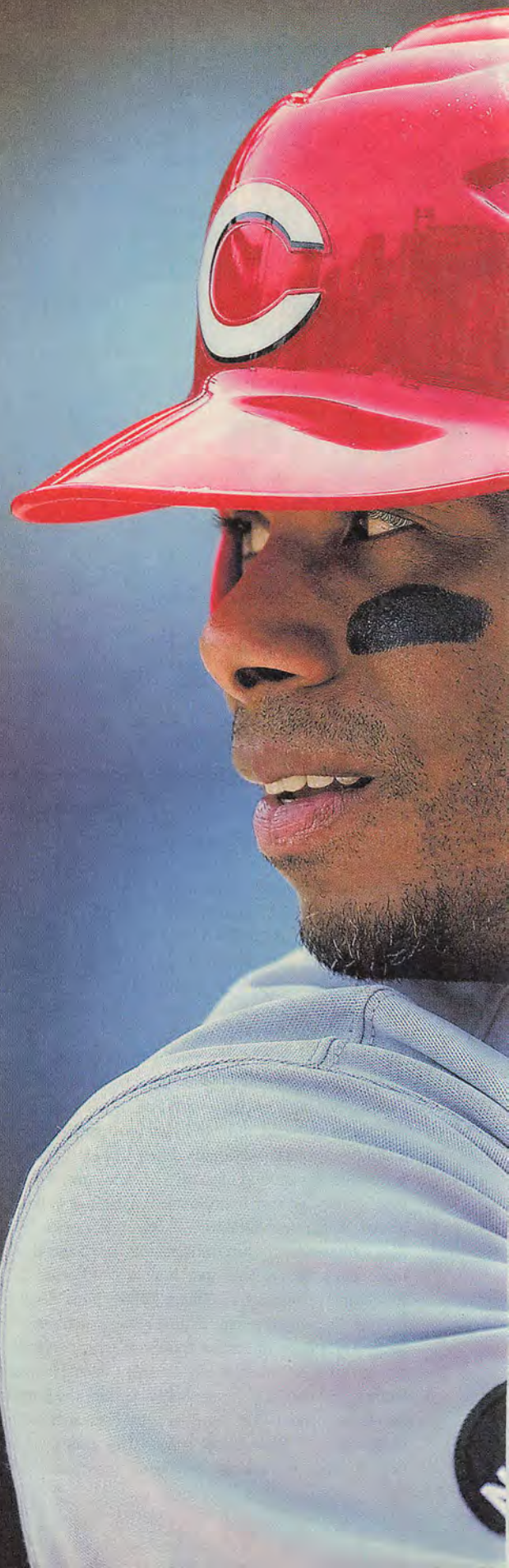
GRIFFEY: He concentrates on football. Kids gravitate to what's fun. The game doesn't look like fun to kids, and that's where baseball has done a really bad job. We don't market our game to kids in a way that makes it look like fun. Other sports do. I work with Boys & Girls Clubs of America and hear from a lot of kids. It's even more true with African American kids. Who was the player they heard about most last year? Barry. The kids ask me, "Why are they always on Barry? If they can do that to him, what can they do to me when I'm nobody? I'm going to play football or basketball. Those guys have fun."

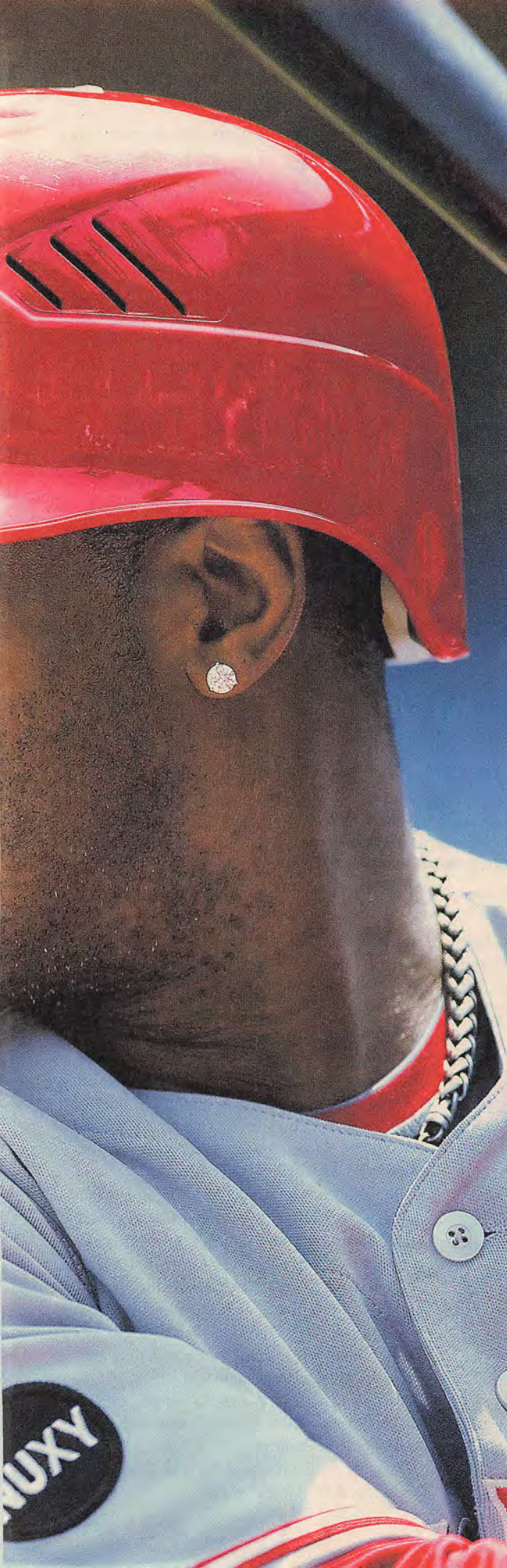
SN: It looks like you have fun when you play.

GRIFFEY: There are good days and bad days. (Long pause and he laughs.) Good days and bad days. It's not all fun. Sometimes, you can will yourself into having fun.

SN: Do you have to do that? I'm surprised.

GRIFFEY: On some days I do. You hit the ball hard three or four times some nights and it's right at somebody, you leave guys on base. You still laugh about it, but that laugh is different. It's more, "All right. Don't do anything crazy." If you play this game





Playing alongside his father was a special time for Griffey, who is quick to say his dad did some things on the field a lot better than he does.

'I learned more about hitting from him batting in front of me in 1990 than at any other time.' —Griffey on his father's influence

long enough, you do have to will yourself to have fun. This game is hard.

SN: You have more all-time votes from fans for the All-Star Game than ...

GRIFFEY: I have a lot of family members.

SN: Not 45 million.

GRIFFEY: I have a lot of family members.

SN: Still, it has to ...

GRIFFEY: I have a lot of family members.

SN: OK, I get it.

GRIFFEY: It's a compliment. I appreciate it. But it's not what I'm about.

SN: When did you realize you are a better player than your dad?

GRIFFEY: I don't compare myself to him. There are some things my dad did a lot better. He could run better. He could move runners along. That was his job. He was a smart hitter. I learned more about hitting from him batting in front of me in 1990 (with the Mariners) than at any other time.

SN: Why?

GRIFFEY: I got to watch somebody who hit like me, who looked like me, who related to me. I watched how pitchers tried to set him up. I really learned how to be a hitter starting from that point.

SN: If I say September 14, 1990, what do you think?

GRIFFEY: Is that the first game we played

together? No, it's the back-to-back (home runs, by Griffey and his father).

SN: Is that special to you?

GRIFFEY: It had never been done before. He hit his, then looked over at me and said something. Then I hit mine. As a parent, it is more fulfilling to watch your kids do something than do something yourself. At that moment, there's no shoe contract, nobody looking trying to critique the game, none of that. It's just the joy of playing and succeeding.

SN: I guess I'm not supposed to ask, but I will. What did he say to you?

GRIFFEY: Oh, I remember. I'm not allowed to say.

SN: Is the mental part of the game fun?

GRIFFEY: It's black and white. Don't let Ken Griffey beat you. Which is fine. Just like across on the other side, you don't let Albert beat you. You don't let Barry beat you.

SN: Doesn't that make your accomplishments even greater?

GRIFFEY: That's the nature of the beast. You get one pitch and you hit it. If you don't get something to hit, you put the bat down and walk to first base. The object of the game is to get runs across the plate. That means you take a walk, steal a base, advance on a bunt, whatever you have to do. It's not about how many home runs you can hit. It's all about doing the little things because then the big thing will happen. **SN**

Nolan Ryan might play hardball

The Rangers' poor start and flagging attendance will likely force their team president to forsake his cautious approach and make changes *By Gerry Fraley*

When Nolan Ryan accepted the job as president of the Texas Rangers in February, he said he wanted time to assess the organization—and that he wasn't going to make any "knee-jerk" changes, a disclosure that disappointed many fans. Little did Ryan know his team would struggle so badly early in the season that he almost certainly would have to reconsider his studious approach.

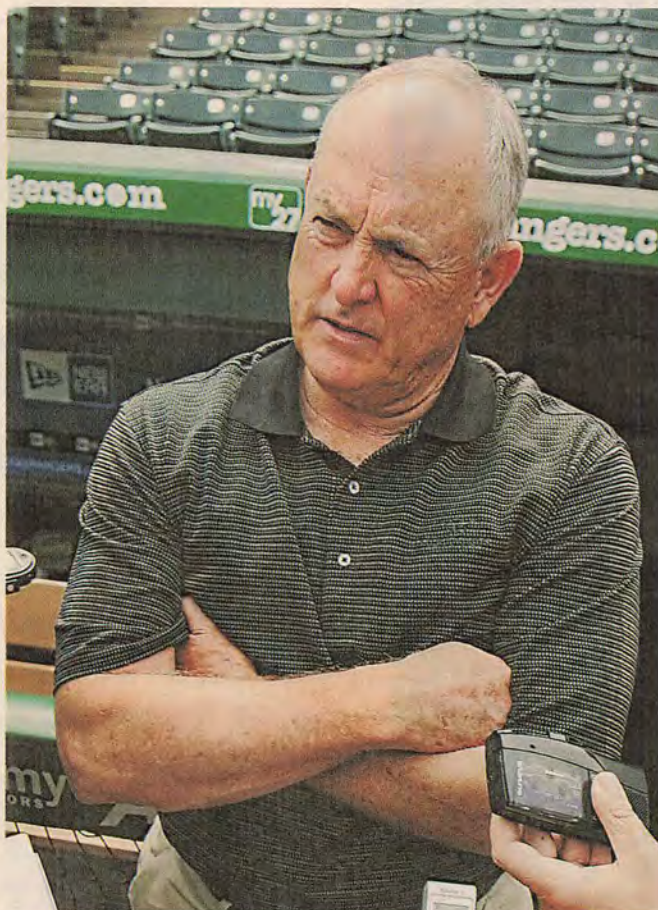
After finishing a doubleheader sweep of the Orioles on April 10, Texas stood at 5-4. And that's the only time the Rangers have had a winning record under manager Ron Washington, who is in his second year on the job. Despite the fact the Rangers had won four straight entering the week, Washington appears to be on the hot seat.

Ryan is no figurehead. He has full authority over the baseball operation, and the empty seats in Rangers Ballpark tell him the customers don't like his product. The team had eight announced crowds of fewer than 20,000 in its first 13 home dates. And the worst April record (10-18) in franchise history didn't accurately reflect the Rangers' level of play. They were worse than that.

Ryan has no ties to Washington or young general manager Jon Daniels, and he was left with no choice but to start a fairly public assessment of the team. Sources throughout baseball now expect changes to be made sooner rather than later.

"Any time a team is in a losing streak, the manager's job is on the line," Washington said as his club was being swept by the Tigers in an April series that ended a particularly woeful stretch—12 losses in 14 games. "It falls on me when the team isn't playing well."

In 11 seasons as a coach with the A's, Washington built a reputation as a top-flight teacher. But good coaches don't always turn into good managers, and



Ryan has a product to sell, and his Texas customers—turned off so far this season—conceivably could buy into a switch in managers.

Washington has been unable to get the team to buy into his message.

He wants a team that plays like Oakland, but the Rangers are not equipped for that. Washington prefers hitters who work counts and a team that creates runs. The Texas roster is more suited to a swing-away, big-inning approach.

A mismatched coaching staff has hurt Wash-

ington's effectiveness, too. There are four distinct elements: bench coach Art Howe and first base coach Gary Pettis, who are Washington loyalists; esteemed hitting coach Rudy Jaramillo, who is from the Doug Melvin-Johnny Oates era; pitching coach Mark Connor and bullpen coach Dom Chiti, who are holdovers from the Buck Showalter regime; and third base coach Matt Walbeck, who was hired by Daniels.

The result of all this is a team that several scouts say is fundamentally unsound. It shows on the field: wasted at-bats and bad baserunning. It shows on the stat sheet: an American League-worst 30 errors.

"It's physical mistakes," Washington says. "We want to play well, but mistakes keep costing us."

If Ryan changes managers, he likely will pick Russ Nixon, who did much of the managerial grunt work in getting the Braves ready

to win in the '90s. Their relationship stems from Nixon's work in Houston's player development system, which includes two affiliates owned by a business group that Ryan heads. Ryan hired Nixon to evaluate the entire Rangers organization.

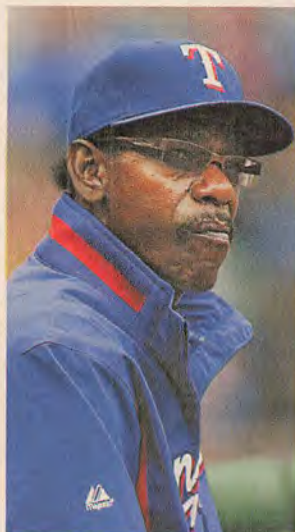
Houston bench coach Jackie Moore and Atlanta special assignment scout Jim Fregosi are other managerial possibilities.

A switch in managers would put Daniels on alert. He has made strides in healing the internal damage wrought by former G.M. John Hart, and the entire player development operation has improved under Daniels' guidance.

But he bears responsibility for choosing Washington as his manager over former Rangers coach Don Wakamatsu, now with the A's. Daniels also has seen decisions about Texas pitchers backfire. As the Rangers again struggle on the mound, pitchers Daniels traded—righthanders Armando Galarraga (Tigers), Edinson Volquez (Reds) and Chris Young (Padres) and lefthander John Danks (White Sox)—are performing well.

Also, a change in managers would seem to increase the possibility Ryan will organize a group to purchase the Rangers.

But, first things first—and that means somehow getting the 2008 Rangers on track. **SN**



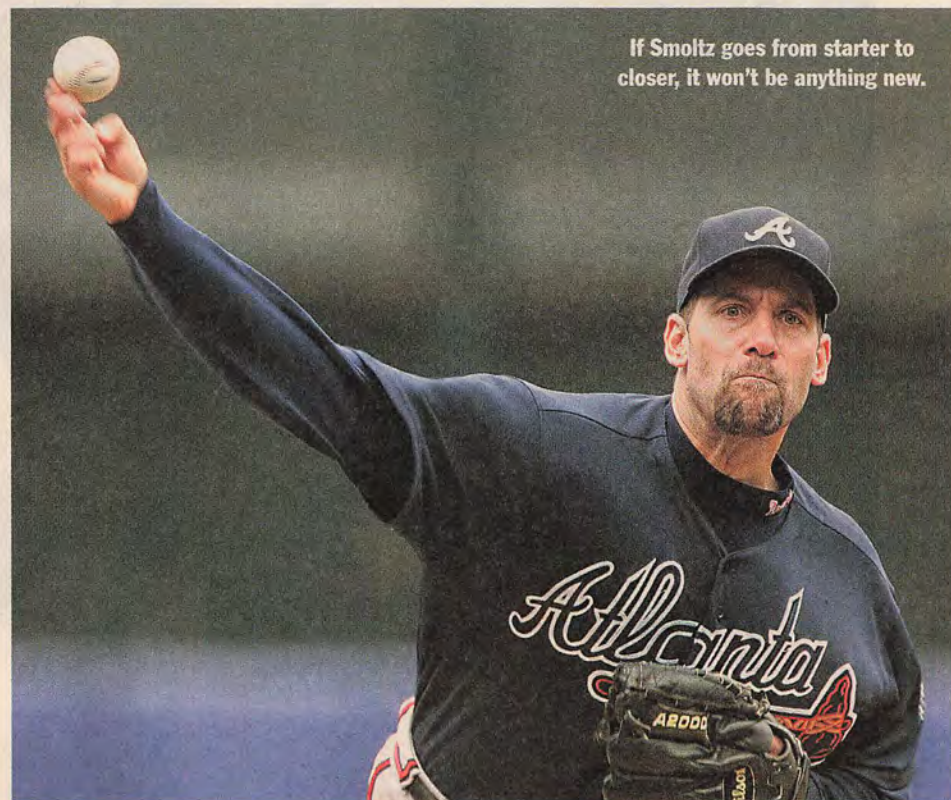
Manager Ron Washington's offensive style isn't meshing with his personnel; a disparate coaching staff isn't helping, either.

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

Plan B for Smoltz is better than Plan A for most pitchers



If Smoltz goes from starter to closer, it won't be anything new.

To my surprise, I see John Smoltz wants to head back to the bullpen. That's not the whole story, though. During spring training, I had one of the most interesting conversations I've had in a long while, and it happened to be with Smoltz.

While exchanging pleasantries, he shared with me that his shoulder was bothering him. He said he thought he would be able to pitch with the pain he described. Believe it or not, pitchers have to learn how to deal with pain. Not many guys go out there and feel right all the time.

The older you get, the more it seems the opposite is true. Those who know Smoltz have heard stories about him coming to the park, saying one thing or another was hurting, then going out and throwing a two-hit shutout. So you know that if he can lift his arm, he's pitching.

The remarkable thing about the conversation was hearing him say he would be fine if he could remain at around 80 percent. He figured the Braves had a good team and a strong rotation with Tim Hudson and Tom Glavine, plus the chance of a return by Mike Hampton. Smoltz figured at this stage of his career he would just pitch through the pain because there wasn't much to be saving his

arm for. The Braves have been good to him, and he wanted to give them whatever he had left.

As a starter, you try to cruise through the first few innings. When you get into a jam, you tend to go as hard as you can until it's over or you're out. John understands that calming down and working slower often is better than throwing harder and harder in those situations, but he said he knew he would have trouble fighting the urge to come out slinging.

So John already is thinking about Plan B: When he gets off the disabled list, he wants to close again. He figures he can use his great stuff for damage control—getting three outs three to four times a week. Because injuries usually occur when the arm is tired, Smoltz figures he can use his arm more efficiently throwing fewer pitches in each outing. With 154 saves under his belt, he certainly has the track record. He'll be fine.

After we spoke, I didn't know whether I should retire or just give credit where it's due. The guy is a one-in-a-million pitcher. He can dominate as a starter and a closer, and, depending on what the Braves need, he'll be there for either. I just hope he's never asked to do both at the same time.

The week ahead

May 9-11

Snake alert

The Cubs probably will miss Diamondbacks ace Brandon Webb in a three-game series at Wrigley Field, but that doesn't mean it will be an easy weekend. The Cubs have lost 20 of their last 28 games against the D-backs, including three in a Division Series sweep last season.

May 12-15

Trade talk

A series between the White Sox and Angels in Anaheim will revisit an offseason trade that so far has not helped either club. The Angels gave up shortstop Orlando Cabrera for rotation stalwart Jon Garland, who has allowed at least six runs in three of his first seven starts. Cabrera hit only .217 in his first month for the Sox.

May 13-14

O's my!

The Orioles and Red Sox will get together for a surprisingly interesting A.L. East battle at Camden Yards. But potential pitching matchups for the two-game series show why the Orioles' early success might be fleeting. Baltimore plans to start righthanders Jeremy Guthrie and Steve Trachsel, who were a combined 1-6 with a 5.02 ERA in 11 April starts. The Red Sox are set up to use Josh Beckett and Daisuke Matsuzaka. Keep in mind, however, that in 2007 the Orioles reached Matsuzaka for nine runs in two games covering 9½ innings. But Beckett is 4-1 with a 2.95 ERA in six career starts against Baltimore.

May 13-15

Pujols phobia

The Pirates' performance in St. Louis has gone from bad to worse since first baseman Albert Pujols reached the majors in 2001. Pujols has hit .357 with a .689 slugging percentage against the Pirates, and his Cardinals are 81-38 overall against them in that span.

—Gerry Fraley

Spring baseball 101

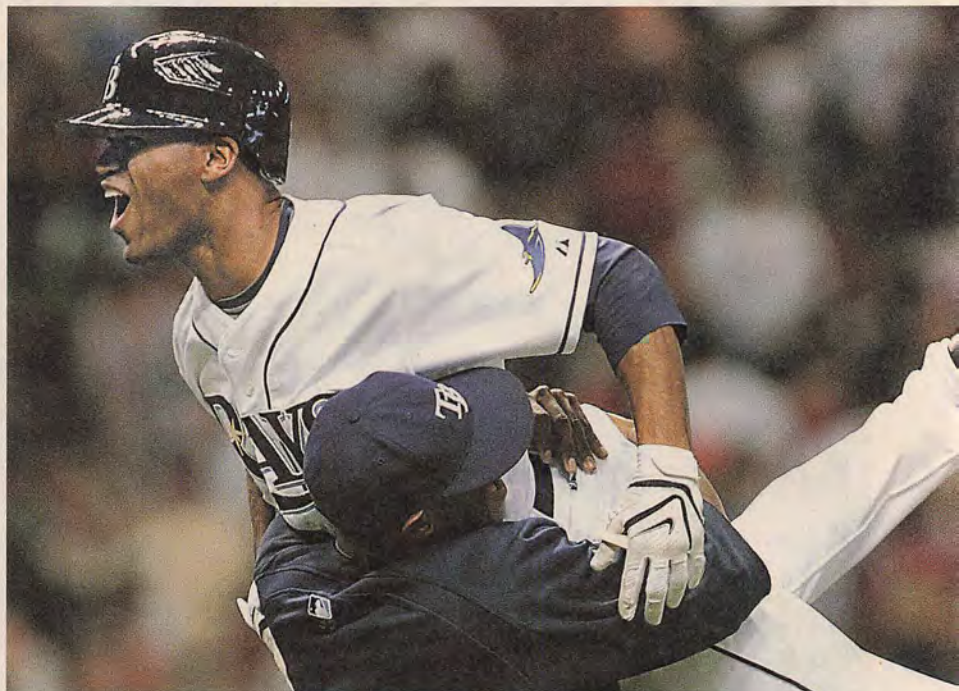
You can't win a pennant in April, but you can lose one. A look at the winners, the losers—and some head-scratchers—in the first month.

Yes, those are the Rays flirting with first in the A.L. East—after the best April in their history. “This is the team we envisioned,” says first baseman Carlos Pena. “Playing like it is so much fun. . . . We can win.”

That's a significant change in mindset for the Rays, who have finished last nine times in 10 seasons. Improved talent and manager Joe Maddon's positive approach are behind it. “There's not any excuse why we should be losing all the time,” All-Star left fielder Carl Crawford says. “Everybody knows that. We're going to have our ups and downs, but we can play against anybody.”

Owner Stuart Sternberg appears realistic in assessing the gap between his team and traditional winners such as the Red Sox and Yankees. “We're in the ballpark now. I'm not saying we're sitting in the box seats and can really touch it and feel it, but we're in the ballpark.”

The Rays won't win the division, but they'll make people watch them in September.



Guys like Nathan Haynes are stepping up, and the Rays are, too.

● Not just the Rays, but the A's

Few people expected the A's to finish above .500 this season after the team traded Dan Haren, Nick Swisher and Mark Kotsay. And no one thought the team would see first place, even in the first month.

“We're realizing we're good enough to compete,” starter Justin Duchscherer says. The A's have shown more offense than expected. As always, they rank high in on-base percentage. Emil Brown was, surprisingly, among league leaders in runs scored and hit .458 with runners in scoring position.

Frank Thomas came over from the Blue Jays, and he does more hitting than whining in an Oakland uniform. Mike Sweeney, who signed a minor league contract in the spring, has been a valuable contributor—and he has a calming influence on young players.

“There are no big egos here,” closer Huston Street says of this odd mix of talent. “We all just want to win.”

Even so, the A's are hardly positioned to be a threat to the division favorite Angels.

● The unexplainable Phillies

The Phillies were 15-12 in April, their best mark in the first month since 2003. They did that with a huge cloud hanging over the bullpen, with Jimmy Rollins, the reigning National League MVP, and Shane Victorino sidelined by injuries and with Ryan Howard off to an even slower start than normal.

“I can't explain it,” general manager Pat Gillick says. “We're missing Victorino and Rollins, and we've played a lot better. It's not because they're not in there. The first 10 or 15 games, we didn't play worth a darn. We have better intensity now. I

don't know why we didn't (before). (Manager) Charlie (Manuel) and I were trying to figure it out. We couldn't.”

Phillies starters provided 14 quality starts, and the bullpen posted the second-lowest ERA (2.65) among N.L. teams. That, despite the fact closer Brad Lidge started the season on the disabled list.

Chase Utley and Pat Burrell were plenty strong enough to offset Howard's woeful .168 average. After striking out 37 times in his first 95 at-bats, Howard is on pace to top the record 199 strikeouts he had last season.

Descending

The Braves. They were 0-9 in 1-run decisions and had only four saves, tied for last in the N.L.

Mets 1B Carlos Delgado. A .204 average and 12 RBIs. The Shea fans booed him, and rightly so.

Indians DH Travis Hafner. “He's trying to guide the ball to left,” says a scout. “Stand up there and swing. Be Pronk.”

The Mariners' offense. The M's were 10th in runs scored, and Richie Sexson had more strikeouts than hits. Sources say the Reds would part with Ken Griffey, and the M's need punch.

The Giants. Aaron Rowand on his first month with the team: “I'm looking forward to May.”

Ascending

Rays closer Troy Percival. Six saves and zero earned runs. What were the Braves thinking?

The Cardinals. Manager Tony La Russa on April: “If it's the last good month we have, nobody's going to be happy with the '08 club.”

Rangers RHP Sidney Ponson. He was 1-0 with a 1.35 ERA after two starts. A scout's assessment: “He can pitch when he decides to pay attention.”

Contributions to this report came from Sporting News writers and The Sports Xchange.

This isn't what Dale Earnhardt had in mind when he started DEI back in 1996.

Losing the race to stay relevant

By Kenny Bruce

They celebrated Dale Earnhardt's birthday last week, and I mention this only because they're not celebrating much else at DEI. You have to look pretty hard before you find a driver from the Dale Earnhardt Inc. camp in the Sprint Cup points standings.

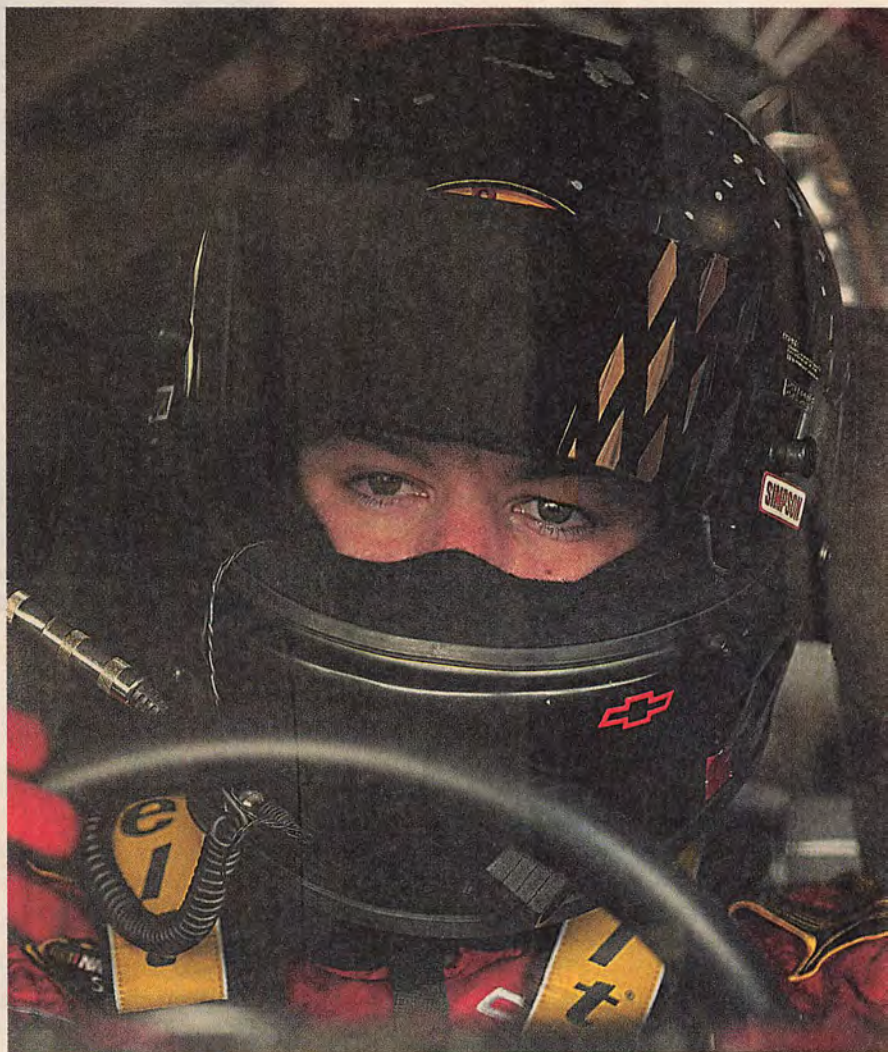
You have to work your way through an alphabet soup of organizations—RCR and JGR, HMS and RFR—before you finally get to DEI driver Martin Truex, who is 15th in points entering the race at Darlington.

Fifteenth. And Truex, 27, is the standard-bearer for the organization.

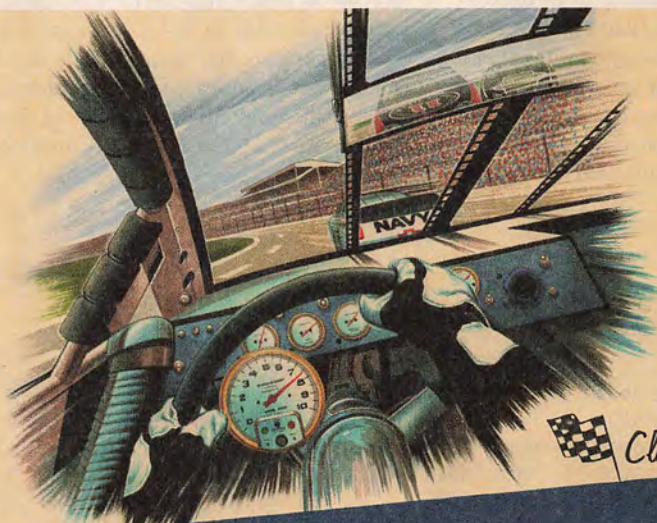
Granted, 15th isn't awful, but it's not something to brag about at the dinner table. And it isn't what Earnhardt, the late seven-time Cup champion, had in mind when he formed his own organization more than a decade ago.

Much has been expected of Truex, who entered the 2008 season fresh off his first career Cup win and first appearance in NASCAR's Chase. And after its nasty divorce with Dale Earnhardt Jr., much was expected of DEI as well. Only most of those expectations were negative.

DEI hasn't become completely obsolete like some predicted it would after losing the sport's most popular driver. The organization's biggest problem is that it hasn't become *anything*.



Truex is now the face of DEI, but you haven't seen much of him among race leaders.



THERE ARE TWO SPEEDS, WINNING AND LOSING.

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Truex is in no worse shape than he was at this time a year ago. The trouble is he isn't in any better shape, either. And now we hear rumblings he might be the next DEI driver to pack his bags and seek his fortune elsewhere. Though DEI officials say they've picked up the option with Truex for 2009, he says there are details that still must be worked out.

Teammate Paul Menard, who completed his first full season in '07, is a good 20 positions higher in the points standings than he was last year. But Menard, 27, hasn't had a top 10 finish since the 2006 season, when he was running a partial schedule.

The jury is still out on Regan Smith, who is 24 and has fewer than 20 career starts. Without solid sponsorship, he could find himself sidelined if his No. 01 team falls out of the top 35 in owner's points.

At 49, Mark Martin has come close to getting the organization into victory lane, but he no longer has the desire to compete on a weekly basis. Aric Almirola, who is 24 and Martin's occasional replacement, is getting too little seat time to show what he can or can't do.

Championship programs aren't built overnight. And they don't fall apart overnight, either. At one time, DEI was knocking on the door. Earnhardt Jr.'s No. 8 team finished fifth or better in points in three of the previous five seasons and, as recently as 2006, was contending for a championship while Truex was just getting started in Cup after winning back-to-back Nationwide titles.

Truex certainly isn't out of the running for this year's Chase, but he has two DNFs to go along with his three top 10 finishes. He's not alone in his misery. Jeff Gordon is a four-time champion, and his run of luck this season has been just as bad—three top fives have been offset by three DNFs for the Hendrick Motorsports driver.

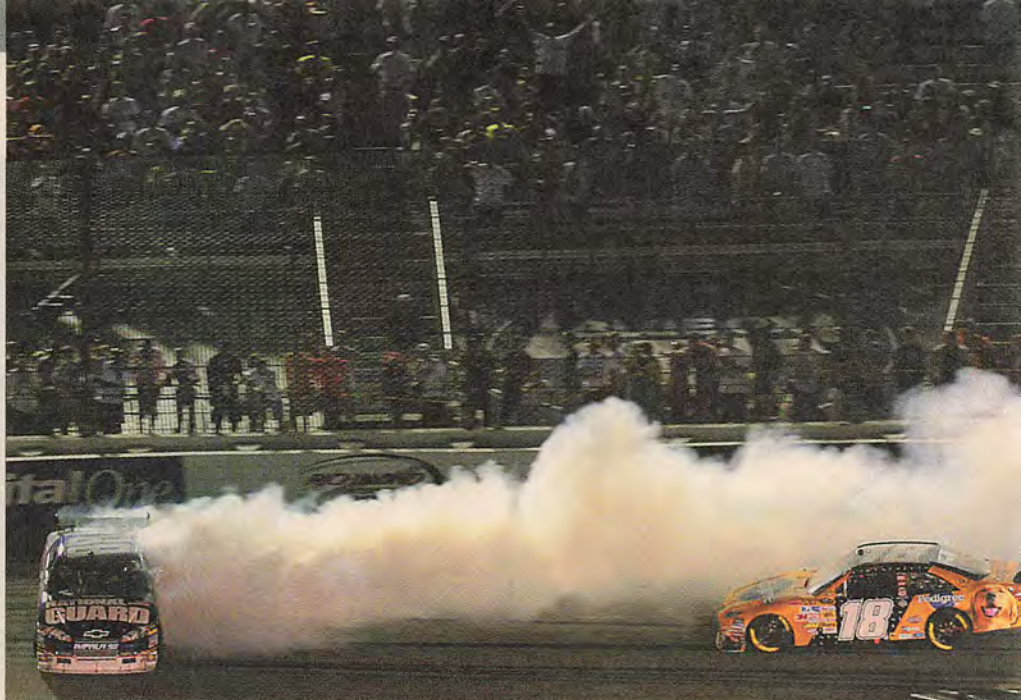
But Gordon, in addition to years of experience, has competitive teammates from which his team can draw information. As do the folks at Roush Fenway Racing, Richard Childress Racing and Joe Gibbs Racing. In today's racing world, that's imperative. Simply having a teammate, or two or three, is no longer enough. Those teammates must be competitive as well.

DEI has a stable of talented young drivers and experienced crews. What it doesn't have, for whatever reason, is success. The organization hasn't reached that next level, and in the meantime the gap between title contenders and everyone else continues to grow.

The question for DEI officials is whether they are content to be a good outfit or aspire to be a great one.

Celebrating Dale Earnhardt's legacy while raising funds for charitable causes is a noble endeavor. But Earnhardt built DEI to win Cup championships, and that's a present that has yet to be delivered. **SN**

Kenny Bruce is assistant managing editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Bruce at scenedaily.com.



Earnhardt found himself on the wrong end of a late-race wreck with Busch (18), and you can bet the two will cross paths again soon, Saturday night at Darlington, perhaps?

On **Dale Earnhardt Jr.**'s XM Satellite radio show last week, IndyCar driver **Danica Patrick** suggested Earnhardt try his hand in the open-wheel series. Seizing the moment, Texas Motor Speedway president **Eddie Gossage** announced an offer of

\$100,000—in cash or to charity—if Earnhardt would compete in the IRL race June 7 at TMS. Earnhardt scoffed at the offer. "He thinks I'm a cheap date, I guess," said Earnhardt, who had a run-in with Gossage in January about a billboard reference to the driver's stepmother, **Teresa Earnhardt**. Earnhardt Jr. said a substantial increase in the offer wouldn't make a difference. "I wouldn't be able to do it—my conscience wouldn't let me. I know his intentions are well. We had that discussion with the billboard thing, and I totally understand what his approach is to advertising now. If I was there testing my car and somebody had their (IndyCar) there, I'd like to jump in and run a couple



of laps, but that would be the extent of the adventure." > Expect **Greg Biffle** to re-sign with Roush Fenway Racing, just as teammate **Carl Edwards** did late last week. "My 100 percent intent is to work out an extension with Roush," Biffle says. "I want

to stay at Roush Fenway until I retire, and they know that." > Amid reports he had decided to stay with Petty Enterprises, free agent-to-be **Bobby Labonte** says he has not made a decision about his future. "I haven't. Nothing from my mouth has said that I've done that. Until then, stay tuned." Labonte's contract ends at the conclusion of this season. > New best buddies **Kyle Busch** and Earnhardt have competed against each other in 124 Cup races, with Busch holding a 66-58 edge in finishing ahead of Earnhardt. Junior has the edge at Darlington, though, site of this weekend's Sprint Cup race. Earnhardt is 3-0 vs. Busch, with three top 10 finishes. Busch has one top 10, in 2006.

speedreads

I just can't believe how much Kurt Busch is struggling each week. His second-place finish in the Daytona 500 still stands as his only top 10 of the season.

Good for Carl Edwards to re-sign with Roush Fenway Racing. If I had won three of the first 10 races, I wouldn't want to leave, either.

A major tip of the cap to the Yates Racing teams for running as well as they have without sustained primary sponsorship. Both David Gilliland and Travis Kvapil have been solid over the last month. —Roger Kuznia

After steering clear of the "Big One" on lap 71, pole-sitter Tony Stewart held off a last-lap charge to claim his first NASCAR Nationwide Series™ win at Talladega Superspeedway. A big thanks to everybody at Joe Gibbs Racing. You make us proud. For the latest news, visit toyota.com/pitpass

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Earning your spurs in the NBA means a playoff trip through San Antonio. It also means a severe case of frustration—and heartbreak.

The leaders of the pack



Parker and the Spurs may look boring outside of the playoffs, but once they're in, the intensity level goes up—way up.

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

The Spurs are laughing at us. Not out loud, mind you. They're too smart to gloat.

After they beat down the Suns with less resistance than expected, Gregg Popovich responded in typical fashion. "It's good to know the playoffs are over," he said, his sarcasm obvious. "We don't have to play anyone else, do we?" In those two sentences, Popovich totally downplayed the significance of beating a top five team and kept the focus on the future. Don't expect anything different if—when might be more like

it—the Spurs handle the Hornets in Round 2. (I'm going to consider San Antonio's 19-point loss in Game 1 an aberration.)

The Spurs have set the bar so high that they were largely responsible for the frenzy of blockbuster trades in February. Three months later, the deals by Dallas and Phoenix don't look so smart. Don't let the Spurs' No. 3 finish in the regular season fool you, either. They were teasing us, letting us think the pack was catching up. Well, it wasn't.

The Spurs understand the difference between the regular season and the playoffs better than anyone. Tim Duncan goes all season without scoring 40 points, then reaches that plateau in his first

playoff game. How do you explain that one, Tim? "I don't know ... dumb luck," he says. Yeah, right.

A common gripe about the Spurs is that they're boring. Well, the only place they're boring is in front of the media, and that's by design. On the court, the Spurs are a finely tuned machine that plays efficiently and smart. They are built around the best threesome in the league, and they have every role covered.

Need a 3-point shooter? Come on down, Michael Finley and Brent Barry. Need a big man/3-point shooter? Robert Horry has made a few big shots in his career. Physical inside presence? Kurt Thomas, get in there. Capable backup at the point?



speedreads

Explain this: Jason Kidd pushes Jannero Pargo while he's in the air and isn't suspended. But last year, Amare Stoudemire and Boris Diaw were banished for one playoff game after leaving the bench, even though they didn't put a finger on anyone. Maybe the league finally realizes that following the law to the letter isn't always best—a year late for the Suns, of course.

Here's hoping Pat Riley stays retired this time. Another 15-67 season and the Hall of Fame might call again, this time to remove his name.

To David Stern: Don't pass a rule to outlaw hack-a-Shaq. Instead, force anyone who makes less than 60 percent of his free throws to start shooting them underhanded. It worked pretty well for Rick Barry.

Manu Ginobili can slide to that position, or how about Jacque Vaughn or Damon Stoudamire? Need an athletic 3? Ime Udoka is your man.

Don't you wonder what the Spurs really thought when they heard the Suns had traded for Shaquille O'Neal? They heard how Shaq would make the Suns better equipped to beat the Spurs. Then the Spurs eliminate Phoenix in five games and before the next morning's paper is on the doorstep, Suns coach Mike D'Antoni appears to be on the way out. That's smart: Get rid of one of the league's top coaches because his personnel is not quite good enough to beat the Spurs.

Dumping D'Antoni would ensure the Suns only this: They will not be any closer to the Spurs this time next year. The Spurs, meanwhile, could be content knowing a challenger in the Western Conference won't be catching up with them anytime soon.

The Mavericks were in the same situation. They knew they couldn't beat the Spurs with the team they had, so they took a chance—a very costly one—on Jason Kidd. As you may have heard, that didn't work out so well. Owner Mark Cuban fired his coach and is expected to blow things up to put together a team that can beat the Spurs. Good luck.

Did you see how Tony Parker went off against the Suns? Because Steve Nash couldn't defend him, the Suns were at a huge disadvantage. In Chris Paul, the Hornets have a point who can stick with Parker. You know what that means? Before this series is over, Ginobili will be the big scorer. The Spurs have an answer for everyone. And, of course, they also have Duncan—the game's best player over the past 10 years.

Don't blame the Suns or the Mavericks for making their big deals. They have to take chances to have a chance against the Spurs.

They just shouldn't be all that surprised when they still come up short. **SN**



ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

The conference semifinals are in full swing. Go to sportingnews.com for daily analysis of the latest playoff action and a look ahead to what's next.

INSIDE DISH

Mavericks SF **Josh Howard's** ill-timed admission that he smokes weed in the offseason should not affect his trade value. "He's not a two- or three-time offender," says a league G.M. "He hasn't even tested positive." Or, as another G.M. says: "It's not like he's an ax murderer."

That G.M. adds that Howard might even deserve props for being honest. Mavs owner **Mark Cuban** said in an e-mail that he's not looking to deal Howard. We'll see. Cuban has few other options if he wants to

rebuild the supporting cast around PF **Dirk Nowitzki**. **>** Raptors G.M. **Bryan Colangelo** plans to keep restricted free agent-to-be **Jose Calderon**, which means he will have two choices for handling his point guard duo of Calderon and **T.J. Ford**: 1) Keep both and run the risk Ford will be unhappy if he loses the starting job or 2) Trade Ford. Moving him would be the best move, but getting equal value won't be easy. He's scheduled to make \$16 million-plus over the next two years. **>** C **Emeka Okafor**, another potential restricted free agent, is more likely to remain with the Bobcats after the hiring of **Larry Brown**—and not only because of the coach's renowned teaching ability. Okafor's relationship with former coach **Sam Vincent** had become strained. **>** Realizing the Nuggets aren't likely to give him the six-year extension he initially talked about, G **Allen Iverson** says he would consider three years. Denver would rather wait until next year to decide whether to extend Iverson, who isn't expected to opt out of the last year of the deal that will pay him more than \$20 million next season. Iverson hasn't been a good influence on SF **Carmelo Anthony**, and the longer Iverson is in Denver, the less chance there is Anthony will behave like a professional. With Iverson around, **George Karl's** goal of instilling more discipline will be more difficult to accomplish. **>** Spurs F/C **Kurt Thomas** says he knew his Phoenix days were numbered last summer when he read that owner **Robert Sarver** was looking to avoid paying the luxury tax. "When you hear the owner wants to get \$10 million under the salary cap, you look at what you make," Thomas says. "When you make \$8 million, you think, 'Hmm. He can do that by getting rid of one guy. Me.'" Thomas, of course, went to San Antonio and helped the Spurs beat his old team in the first round of the playoffs.

If the road to Lombardi is paved with sacks, the Jaguars did what they had to in the draft.

Job 1: QB annihilation



The Jaguars have visions of Peyton Manning pinballing between Groves (above) and Harvey.

By Clifton Brown

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Harassing quarterbacks is in Jack Del Rio's blood. He did it as a linebacker. He did it as a linebackers coach and defensive coordinator. Now as coach of the Jaguars, Del Rio is using the draft to harass quarterbacks.

Jacksonville created a buzz by trading away three draft picks and swapping first-round picks to move up 18 spots to grab Florida end Derrick Harvey at No. 8. Then in the second round, the Jaguars dealt away two more picks and swapped second-round selections to move up six spots to land another sack addict, Auburn's Quentin Groves.

The Jaguars gave up a lot for Harvey and Groves. But it was worth it.

Risk is required when you are trying to beat Peyton Manning and Tom Brady, two great quarterbacks in their prime. The Jaguars were a com-



bined 0-3 against the Colts and Patriots last season. In New England's playoff victory over the Jaguars, Brady completed 26 of 28 passes and was sacked just once. Brady's jersey stayed so clean, he could have worn it to dinner with Gisele Bundchen.

The Jaguars want Manning and Brady to eat the football before they can pass it. Adding two young pass rushers made more sense than trading for

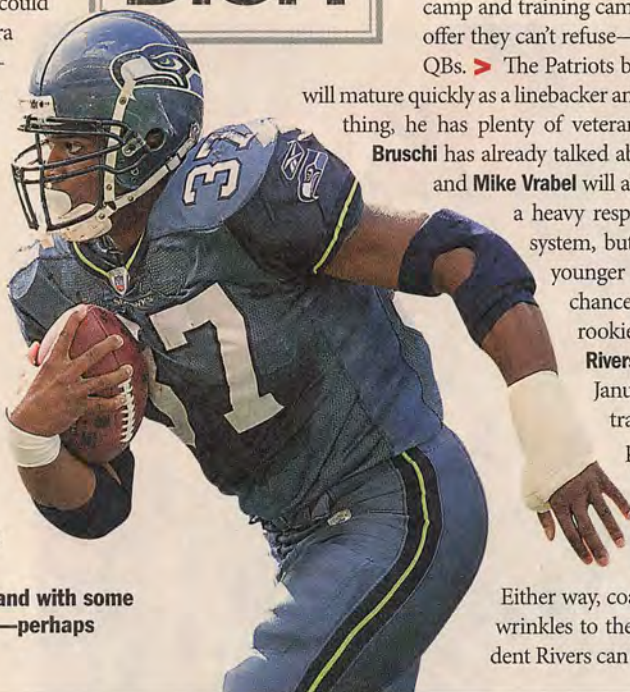
Miami's Jason Taylor, who will turn 34 in September. Taylor is an elite pass rusher, but he won't be in the NFL five years from now. Pinning their hopes on Taylor would have been a bigger gamble.

"I don't believe in that type of philosophy," says Del Rio, referring to the thinking that a team is just one player from winning a Super Bowl. "There were a lot of teams stacked to win it all."

Even without the draft picks they surrendered,

The Bengals' interest in former Seahawks RB **Shaun Alexander** reflects their concern about the running game. **Kenny Watson** led Cincinnati with 763 yards last season, when **Rudi Johnson** missed five games with a hamstring injury, and the Bengals ranked 24th in the league. No team ranked worse than 21st made the playoffs. Alexander's days of winning rushing titles are over, but he could still help plenty of teams that need a quality extra body. ➤ Eagles FS **Brian Dawkins** will turn 35 during the season, so it was no surprise when the team drafted UTEP S **Quintin Demps** in the fourth round. Dawkins is coming off a down season in which he missed six games and had just one interception. He also was distracted off the field after his wife gave birth prematurely to twin girls. The children are fine, Dawkins is healthy, and this season will reveal how much Dawkins, who is in the final year of his contract, has left. ➤ It was easy to see the Redskins' intentions by looking at their draft—they want to throw the ball more. By taking WR **Devin Thomas**, TE **Fred Davis** and WR **Malcolm Kelly** with their first three picks, the Redskins are trying to develop a young nucleus to grow with QB **Jason Campbell**. New coach **Jim Zorn** already has a pass-catching tight end in **Chris Cooley**, but Davis will give the Redskins the ability to use more two-tight end sets. And Campbell

Alexander will land with some RB-needy team—perhaps Cincinnati.



loves throwing to the tight end. ➤ The crowded quarterback situation in Tampa Bay—**Jeff Garcia** heads a group of five QBs on the roster—means **Chris Simms** is likely headed elsewhere. Simms has not played in more than 19 months since suffering a serious injury that resulted in the removal of his spleen. If Simms shows he is healthy during minicamp and training camp, someone will make the Bucs an offer they can't refuse—there are enough teams that need QBs. ➤ The Patriots believe first-round pick **Jerod Mayo** will mature quickly as a linebacker and fit well into their system. For one thing, he has plenty of veteran teammates to learn from. **Tedy Bruschi** has already talked about taking Mayo under his wing, and **Mike Vrebel** will also be a mentor. Linebackers carry a heavy responsibility in coach **Bill Belichick's** system, but because the Patriots need to get younger at the position, Mayo will get a chance for quality playing time as a rookie. ➤ The Chargers expect QB **Philip Rivers**, who had ACL reconstruction in January, to be ready for the start of training camp. Rivers' recovery has progressed ahead of schedule, but it's too early to determine whether TE **Antonio Gates** (toe) and C **Nick Hardwick** (foot) will be ready by the start of the season. Either way, coach **Norv Turner** will add a few new wrinkles to the passing game because he's confident Rivers can handle more.

the Jaguars remain stacked enough, and young enough, to be contenders for the next several years. And Harvey and Groves suit their vision. Harvey rushed from both sides at Florida. Groves is one of those hybrid rushers who can be effective lining up in a three-point stance or standing up like a linebacker and coming at quarterbacks from a running start.

That fits perfectly with how Del Rio and new coordinator Gregg Williams want to play. They want the Jaguars' defense to be less predictable. They want to move pass rushers around, probing until they find the easiest path to the quarterback.

Many teams talk about playing that way but lack the personnel to do it. End Paul Spicer led the Jaguars with 7½ sacks last season, but that was tied for 29th in the league. He needed help. Now he has some.

The Giants beat on quarterbacks like they were pinatas last season, and the Super Bowl trophy popped out. They led the league in sacks, followed by the Patriots, Cowboys, Seahawks and Chargers, all of whom made the playoffs. That was not a coincidence.

"You win the game up front, on both sides of the ball," says Eagles coach Andy Reid. "If the D-line is better than the O-line, the quarterback is going to be in trouble. That's how it worked out in

the Super Bowl. That theory really rises to the top."

Short-term expectations are for Harvey and Groves to give the Jaguars a deeper defensive line, even if they can't supplant Reggie Hayward and Spicer in the starting lineup. Rookie pass rushers usually take awhile to develop. In the past five drafts, only one rookie end has reached double figures in sacks. That was Chicago's Mark Anderson, a fifth-round pick in 2006 who had 12 sacks and helped the Bears reach the Super Bowl. Gaines Adams of the Buccaneers led rookie ends in sacks last season with six. (Two outside linebackers who played end in college, Baltimore's Terrell Suggs in 2003 and Cleveland's Kamerion Wimbley in 2006, reached double digits in sacks as rookies.)

Both Harvey and Groves need to work on weaknesses. Harvey is a better pass rusher than run stopper. Groves (6-3, 249 pounds) is undersized at end. Many scouts believe Groves is best suited to play linebacker—and if he can't cut it as an end, he is less likely to have the impact the Jaguars want.

But at least the Jaguars are taking an aggressive approach as they try to reach their first Super Bowl. They decided the quickest way to get better was to get after the quarterback. And they're right.

SN

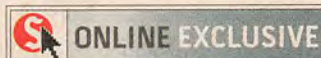
speedreads

Bill Parcells has no reason to pick a fight with Jason Taylor. He is the Dolphins' best player. And he looks much better on the dance floor than the Dolphins looked on the field last season.

The Cardinals say they have no interest in trading Anquan Boldin. But Boldin wants to know when the Cardinals will be interested in paying him more money.

The Titans want Vince Young to become a better passer. So why did they pass on the chance to draft better wide receivers?

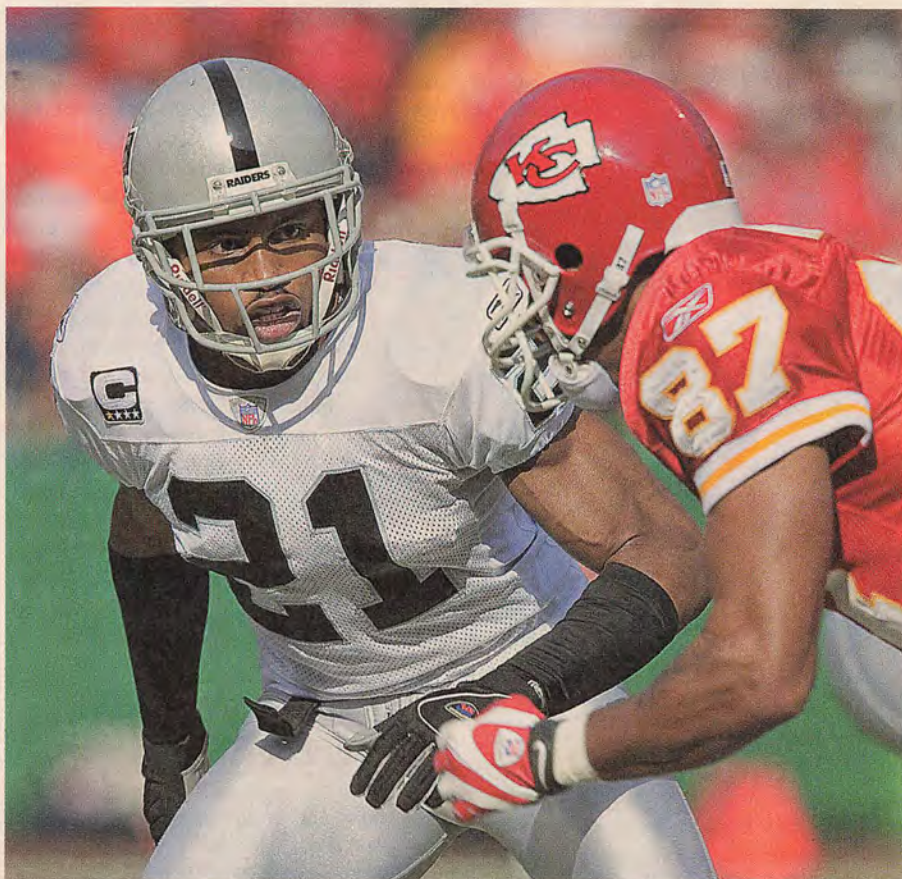
All of the top rookies are saying they will report to training camp on time. We'll see if they're still saying that in July.



The draft is over, but minicamps are in full swing. To keep up with NFL developments, read Clifton Brown at sportingnews.com.

AFC

Focus on COR



Asomugha (above) was pretty good last year. But having Hall on the field will make him better.

1 Raiders Offseason pickup DeAngelo Hall and Nnamdi Asomugha give the team the best corner combo in the NFL. Asomugha, who had only one pick last year, will get more balls thrown into his area with Hall on the other side.

2 Chargers Antonio Cromartie has big hands, long arms and outstanding speed. Quentin Jammer won't intercept many passes but is a sticky cover guy. First-round pick Antoine Cason will compete for the nickel job.

3 Broncos Champ Bailey will be back to his old ballhawking ways if the line play improves. Dre' Bly has great ball skills but is vulnerable to double moves. Karl Paymah has good size and played with more discipline last year.

4 Colts With their size (both are 6-0, 195) and physical style, Marlin Jackson and Kelvin Hayden are ideal starters in coach Tony Dungy's scheme. Tim Jennings and Dante

Hughes are promising options for the No. 3 job.

5 Jaguars Offseason addition Drayton Florence is an aggressive player who is a plus in run support. Former Pro Bowler Rashean Mathis will return hungry after playing tentatively in 2007 because of a leg injury.

6 Ravens When healthy, Chris McAlister, 30, and Samari Rolle, 31, are solid or better. They're aging but still have enough speed to run with receivers. Fabian Washington was acquired to provide insurance and to help in the nickel.

TOP
5

1. Champ Bailey, Broncos
2. Antonio Cromartie, Chargers
3. Nnamdi Asomugha, Raiders
4. DeAngelo Hall, Raiders
5. Chris McAlister, Ravens

7 Bengals Johnathan Joseph and Leon Hall are strong enough to reroute receivers and fast enough to cover them deep. Hall does a better job of making plays on the ball. Former Pro Bowler Deltha O'Neal is the nickel back.

8 Titans Cortland Finnegan is a physical player who holds his own in coverage. Nick Harper helps in run support and does a good job of making plays on the ball. Eric King and Reynaldo Hill are experienced backups.

9 Patriots Ellis Hobbs, who's coming off two offseason surgeries, will start on the right. Free-agent pickup Fernando Bryant and rookie Terrence Wheatley will battle for the other job. Overall, the group lacks size.

10 Steelers Deshaea Townsend had a strong 2007, but he's 32 and will eventually wear down. Ike Taylor is steady but hasn't played up to his big contract. Bryant McFadden hasn't played well enough to win a starting job.

11 Jets Darrelle Revis is a future Pro Bowler—his coverage skills are excellent, and his ball skills are improving—but the other starting job is up for grabs. David Barrett could be cut, and Hank Poteat could be re-signed.

12 Bills Rookie Leodis McKelvin will help immediately in the nickel and will eventually challenge Ashton Youboty for a starting job. Terrence McGee does a good job of recovering after receivers get separation.

13 Chiefs Rookie Brandon Flowers brings life to a stale position. He will join Patrick Surtain, 31, who should be good for one more year. Tyron Brackenridge played well in the nickel as a rookie.

14 Texans With Dunta Robinson out half the season, the Texans will struggle. Fred Bennett is big and physical. Free-agent pickup Jacques Reeves is a quick corner who will start until Robinson returns.

15 Browns Young starters Eric Wright and Brandon McDonald should improve upon solid rookie years, and Daven Holly will be a plus in the nickel. But none is proven.

16 Dolphins The team has confidence in Will Allen, but after him, there's a group of injury-plagued, inexperienced and undervalued guys. Andre Goodman and Travis Daniels are the top candidates to start opposite Allen.

NERBACKS

NFC

1 Eagles Lito Sheppard and offseason pick-up Asante Samuel are supreme playmakers. Sheppard is every bit the ballhawk Samuel is, but injuries have limited him too often. Sheldon Brown is a punishing hitter.

2 Packers Al Harris, 33, and Charles Woodson, 31, form perhaps the best press corner duo in the NFL, but they're getting old. Tramon Williams finished 2007 as the nickel; he is quick and tough but lacks size (5-11, 185).

3 Seahawks Marcus Trufant is coming off a Pro Bowl season in which he led NFC corners in interceptions. Kelly Jennings was solid on the right side. Nickel back Jordan Babineaux's best trait is versatility.

4 Vikings Antoine Winfield—perhaps the NFL's best tackling corner—and Cedric Griffin do a good job of pressing receivers. Charles Gordon might be the best cover guy among three players vying for the nickel job.

5 Cowboys Terence Newman made the Pro Bowl last season but needs to intercept more passes. Anthony Henry knocks down balls with his long arms. If Pacman Jones is reinstated, he should excel in one-on-one coverage.

6 Panthers Ken Lucas is underrated; he's a complete run/pass corner. Chris Gamble isn't much of a tackler but has pure cover ability. Nickel back Richard Marshall might eventually be the best of the group.

7 49ers Nate Clements covers the opponent's top receiver and isn't afraid to help in run support. Walt Harris' play dipped a bit last season, so the team drafted Reggie Smith with the hopes he can be a starter in the future.

8 Bears Nathan Vasher is skilled in cover 2, and Charles Tillman is physical in press coverage and run support. Ricky Manning is an experienced nickel back but will be challenged by Trumaine McBride and Zackary Bowman.

9 Buccaneers Rookie Aqib Talib gives the team a playmaker who is effective in man schemes. Ronde Barber is at his best working the slot on passing downs. Eugene Wilson and Phillip Buchanon are solid in man-to-man.

10 Redskins Shawn Springs can cover one-on-one, press at the line or drop into a zone. Fred Smoot sometimes gives receivers too much cushion. Carlos Rogers is coming



Trufant had seven interceptions in 2007. He's going to have to beg for QBs to throw his way.

off a devastating knee injury.

11 Cardinals Rod Hood and Eric Green are solid, but rookie Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie will challenge them for a job. Antrel Rolle was moved to safety but could return to his nickel slot, where he has had success.

12 Giants Corey Webster was a revelation in the playoffs but must prove he can do it for the long haul. Aaron Ross is coming off a strong rookie year. Second-round pick Terrell Thomas is aggressive in press coverage.

13 Lions The team made upgrades with the trade for Leigh Bodden, who is un-

derated, and the acquisition of free agent Brian Kelly, a Tampa 2 scheme veteran. Nickel back Travis Fisher is good in short zones.

14 Rams The team lacks a difference-maker. Fakhir Brown is decent in coverage and is a sure tackler. Tye Hill has good speed but is undersized and injury-prone. Nickel back Ron Bartell must make better use of his size.

15 Saints The team made marginal improvement at its weakest position by adding free agents Randall Gay and Aaron Glenn and drafting Tracy Porter. Gay and Porter will push starters Mike McKenzie and Jason David.

16 Falcons The team's best starter is journeyman Von Hutchins, who is better suited to the slot. Chris Houston struggled as a rookie. The team drafted Chevis Jackson, but he doesn't have the speed to run with the fastest receivers.

TOP
5

1. Marcus Trufant, Seahawks
2. Asante Samuel, Eagles
3. Antoine Winfield, Vikings
4. Al Harris, Packers
5. Nate Clements, 49ers

INSIDE THE AFC

Out with the old relentless sack machine, in the with new relentless sack machine

RE Tamba Hali will become the featured pass rusher now that the Chiefs have traded Jared Allen. Hali is, like Allen, a relentless player who makes many of his plays through sheer effort. But Hali must learn to finish better than he did last season. He will be helped this year by the element of surprise—he will usually be approaching the quarterback from his blind side.

BALTIMORE Coach John Harbaugh says there will be open competition at quarterback, but Kyle Boller likely will be the starter. Boller has more experience and better skills than backup Troy Smith and rookie Joe Flacco. G.M. Ozzie Newsome says the Ravens made a mistake when they rushed Boller into the starting lineup, and the team does not want to repeat that.

BUFFALO QB Trent Edwards doesn't have great arm strength, but he is accurate. He avoids sacks by making decisions and getting rid of the ball quickly. He needs to read coverages better and avoid locking on to receivers.

CINCINNATI Rookie LB Keith Rivers was easily the most impressive rookie at minicamp—he showed off his outstanding speed and strength. An aggressive player, Rivers needs to be careful not to overpursue. He'll start right away, but the coaching staff must decide where.

CLEVELAND The Browns like Jason Wright as the top backup to RB Jamal Lewis. Wright has average size (5-10, 214), speed and athleticism, but he seems to get tougher and more confident every year. He is a very good blocker and never blows an assignment.

DENVER DT Dewayne Robertson could be a major contributor to the club's thin interior line. He excels as a one-gap slasher, but his deteriorating knee might not hold up.

HOUSTON Unless WR Jacoby Jones makes big strides, he's going to have a hard time getting many balls thrown his way. He has great breakaway speed, but he needs to learn the offense inside and out.

INDIANAPOLIS Backup RB Kenton Keith must improve his all-around game. He dropped too many passes last year. That won't be tolerated in coordinator Tom Moore's efficiency-based offense.

JACKSONVILLE S Pierson Prioleau will help

the secondary transition into the scheme of new coordinator Gregg Williams. Prioleau spent extensive time with Williams in Washington and Buffalo.

MIAMI Drew Mormino will start at right guard as rookie Shawn Murphy develops. Mormino does well getting into position and sustaining blocks, but he doesn't have the size (299 pounds), strength or initial burst needed to keep the job long term.

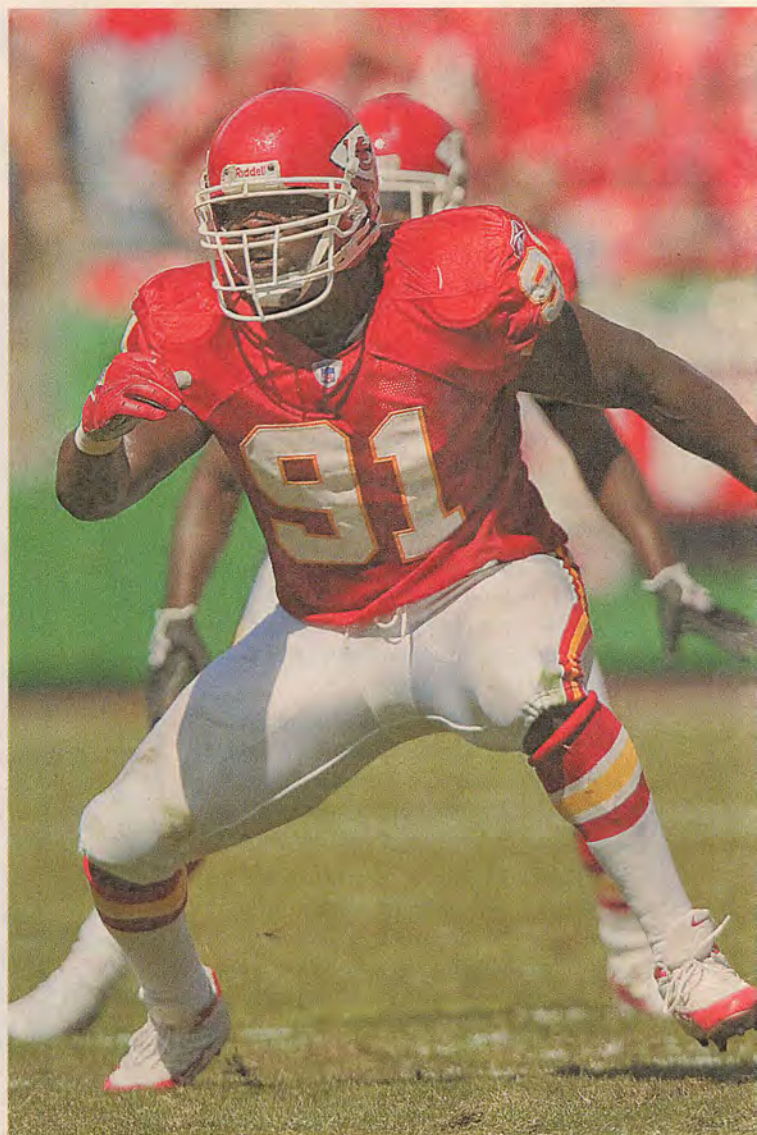
NEW ENGLAND First-round pick Jerod Mayo likely will start his career as a weakside linebacker. The key for Mayo will be recognizing what's happening in front of him and filling the proper lanes at the line of scrimmage.

NEW YORK TE Bubba Franks is a very effective blocker—and he'll likely do a lot of blocking with the Jets. They might use him as an H-back, too.

OAKLAND Kwame Harris is the leading candidate at left tackle; the Raiders view him as a nice fit in their zone-blocking scheme. Harris' strength is run-blocking, and he often struggles to pass-block.

PITTSBURGH It looks like Chris Kemoeatu will start at left guard. He is powerful at the point of attack and is probably the team's most aggressive lineman, but he sometimes struggles when

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Michael C. Wright; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jeff Darlington; New England, John Tomase; New York, J.P. Pelzman; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Acee; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.



As the Chiefs' go-to sack guy, Hali must do a better job bringing down the quarterback once he gets his hands on him.

pulling. The coaches think he will improve with more playing time.

SAN DIEGO For the first time in several years, the Chargers are stocked with talented receivers. Legedu Naanee knows how to get open and appears to have improved his attention to detail in route running. The depth might allow the team to trade WR Eric Parker.

TENNESSEE New coordinator Mike Heimerdinger is pushing the receivers to be in the best shape of their careers. Heimerdinger doesn't regularly rotate his receivers like other teams, instead preferring for them to stay on the field for entire drives.

Carolina switches recipes to get more heat from Peppers

After playing six years on the left side, Panthers DE Julius Peppers is moving to the right, the prime pass-rushing slot. Putting Peppers there means he will face up against left tackles, and it will allow him to attack the blind side and give him more chances to make plays. He is coming off a career-worst 2½-sack season, but his 56 career sacks dwarf the numbers of the other ends on the roster.

ARIZONA QB Matt Leinart must continue to build strength in his left shoulder after breaking his collarbone last season, but his drops looked much better in the team's recent minicamp. Last year, he had a tendency to cross over with his first step, which led to shallower drops.

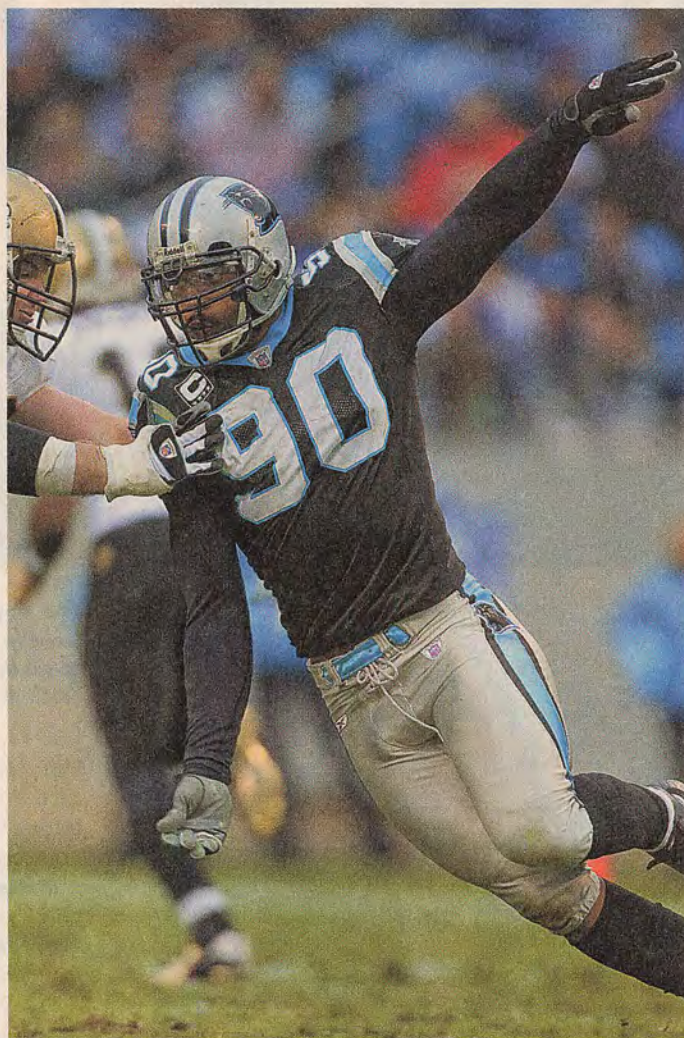
ATLANTA The team drafted Harry Douglas, which likely spells the end of WR Joe Horn's short tenure in Atlanta. The Falcons like Douglas' route-running ability as an inside-outside receiver. He'll compete for the No. 3 spot.

CHICAGO RB Matt Forte, the team's second-round pick, was the star of rookie minicamp. He has great size (6-2, 222) and displayed the burst and quickness that have been missing at the position. His chances of winning the starting job increased after Cedric Benson was arrested last weekend.

DALLAS First-round CB Mike Jenkins made a positive impression in the first rookie minicamp. He showed fluid footwork and good instincts, which are the reasons the Cowboys thought he was the cornerback most ready to contribute this year.

DETROIT Second-rounder Jordon Dizon will be put at middle linebacker from the start of minicamp. He is expected to move into a starting position. When that happens, Paris Lenon will shift to the strong side.

GREEN BAY Rookie TEs Jermichael Finley and Mike Peterson have a chance to be part of the offense this year. Finley is a tall, lanky receiver who will struggle as an in-line blocker. Peterson, who went undrafted, might wind up being more of an H-back.



Peppers didn't put up big numbers last season, but now that he's on the move, look for that to change.

MINNESOTA LB Erin Henderson has an excellent chance to make the team as an undrafted free agent. His brother, E.J., is the team's middle line-

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Matt Barrows; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.

backer. Erin could provide cheap depth at all three linebacker positions and play on special teams.

NEW ORLEANS The Saints want to get more dynamic on special teams after not returning a kick for a touchdown last year. They'll start by using RB Reggie Bush more often on punt returns and take a look at second-round pick Tracy Porter on punts and kicks.

NEW YORK The decision to draft WR Mario Manningham puts heat on Sinorice Moss, who has not developed in his first two years. Moss is 5-8 and has had difficulty getting open. He likely will be looked at as a punt returner.

PHILADELPHIA The team traded a fourth-round pick for RB Lorenzo Booker, a poor man's Brian Westbrook. Like Westbrook, Booker is a dual threat on offense—as a rusher and receiver.

ST. LOUIS A healthy Richie Incognito at right guard could do wonders for the running game. He is powerful at the point of attack and brings attitude to the line play. Knee and ankle problems limited him to four games last year.

SAN FRANCISCO The fact the 49ers didn't draft a pass rusher shows they are confident OLBs Tully Banta-Cain and Parys Haralson can combine for more than six sacks this season. The 49ers believe an improved defensive line will give their linebackers more freedom to make more plays.

SEATTLE RB Julius Jones, a free-agent addition, is doing two things recently released Shaun Alexander couldn't or wouldn't do the past two seasons: Jones is catching the ball out of the backfield and blocking.

TAMPA BAY RB Earnest Graham figures to be the go-to guy in the running game again. He proved last season he can carry a heavy workload and produce at a high level. The key to his success is his straightforward, one-cut approach.

WASHINGTON It will take QB Jason Campbell time to adjust to new coach Jim Zorn's offense. Not only does he have to learn the system, but Zorn is working with Campbell on his footwork and stance coming away from center.

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

If pictures of Tyler Hansbrough jumping off a fraternity balcony into a tiny swimming pool are showing up on the Internet, it must mean the spring semester is ending. You know what that means: It's time for final grades.

Around here, you're not graded on tests in biology, philosophy or phys ed—only on major college coaching hires. If you don't like your grade, well, tough. Study harder next time. (And there will be a next time.)

Indiana: Just when we thought the struggling IU administration was going to give us more tomfoolery, we were presented with Tom Crean. The Hoosiers should have brought in Al Michaels for the introductory press conference. *Do you believe in miracles?* Yes, I do now. **Grade: A+**

LSU: This might have been the trickiest of all the hires because much of the search occurred without a permanent athletic director in place. Joe Alleva was hired away from Duke to run the athletic department just days before the coaching job closed up with the hiring of Trent Johnson. Luring Johnson from Stanford contained some risk because of the geographic adjustment he will have to make, but he does a great job of putting his players in the best position to win. Johnson immediately was endorsed by Collis Temple Jr., a key figure in the region's talent development system, and he made the wise decision to hang on to key recruiter Butch Pierre. **Grade: A**

California: The only problem with hiring Mike Montgomery is that the Bears are getting him at age 61 rather than 41. But he's an elite bench coach with an excellent eye for talent and plenty of energy. Cal athletic director Sandy Barbour was wise to close this deal before Stanford began its coaching search, which might have created a bidding war. **Grade: A-**

South Carolina: Yes, it helped Darrin Horn that Western Kentucky got hot and reached the Sweet 16. No, that's not all there is. Horn averaged 22 wins for the Hilltoppers over five seasons. Not bad for a guy in his mid-30s. **Grade: B+**

Marquette: In a panic, the Golden Eagles

Coaching carousel season is over, and it's time to issue grades.
So who are the winners and losers?

Hire education



LSU gets high marks for delivering Johnson (above), who knows how to coach up his players, but Stanford didn't do its homework on Dawkins.



handed Buzz Williams a million-dollar opportunity. One night the school's administration thought it could lure Tony Bennett from Washington State; less than 12 hours later, Marquette assistant Williams was summoned home from the Final Four to interview for the job. Hiring him did not keep the recruiting class together, so what was the

hurry? No matter, Williams turned in a solid year as coach at New Orleans in 2006-07 and is better prepared than most assistants to slide into the head coaching chair. **Grade: B**

Massachusetts: Derek Kellogg will bring the dribble drive motion offense to a UMass program that's already familiar with an uptempo style, so the transition should be smooth. Kellogg has a solid assistant coaching pedigree and great passion for his alma mater. **Grade: B**

Oregon State: Desperate times (0-18 in the Pac-10) meet desperate measures (bringing Craig Robinson cross-country from Brown University to install the Princeton offense). **Grade: B-**

Oklahoma State: If I write again that T. Boone Pickens' money should have purchased something flashier than a (Travis) Ford, will I be plagiarizing myself? Yeah, probably. **Grade: C-**

Providence: So much of Keno Davis' success will hinge on hiring a staff that can make the pro-

gram competitive for Eastern recruits. It's still too early to judge. **Grade: Incomplete**

Stanford: Grade inflation might be an issue in many universities—but it's not in the Stanford athletic department. Bob Bowsby bungled the recent coaching change as though he were auditioning to be A.D. at Barnum & Bailey's clown college. First he allowed the term of Johnson's contract to dwindle to two years. Then he watched Johnson sign a strong recruiting class, earn Pac-10 coach of the year honors (while leading the Cardinal to a second-place finish) and take his team to a Sweet 16 berth in the NCAA Tournament. And, still, he didn't offer him an extension. Essentially, Bowsby shoved Johnson onto the coaching carousel.

Then Bowsby hired Johnny Dawkins to replace him. By all accounts, Dawkins is bright, personable and astute. He also spent most of his term as a Duke assistant in a position that required no off-campus recruiting. It seems a bit disingenuous for Dawkins to accept such a prominent position without the most important skill he will need. On the court, Duke emphasizes individual players creating scoring opportunities, an approach not likely to translate to the type of players Stanford accepts.

The Cardinal regressed from an experienced coach who had built a program at Nevada and understood Stanford's unique demands to a rookie with virtually no recruiting experience. How can that be allowed to happen? **Grade: D+** **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Overhyped or underhyped? Mike DeCourcy analyzes some of the guys who declared for the draft at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

Video of Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama playing ball with the North Carolina players prompts this scouting report: He's uncomfortable unless he's going to the left.

Ohio State center Kosta Koufos has decided it's time to sign with an agent and commit to the NBA draft. I would have thought the ability to make a layup would be a prerequisite for employment in the league, but maybe that's just me.

Just wondering: If college football's Hall of Fame puts John Cooper on the same level as Joe Paterno and Bear Bryant, shouldn't Dean Smith be making room for John Brady in the college hoops Hall?



Alexander was great down the stretch, and that picture-perfect shooting form could score him a job in the NBA.

INSIDE DISH

It might seem that **Mike Montgomery** was unlucky when his old Stanford coaching job opened just five days after he signed on at California. But don't be so sure. Taking over at Cal means more money (Stanford traditionally does not pay top dollar), offers access to a larger pool of recruits (Stanford's standards might be the toughest of any big-time program) and comes with lower expectations based on the previous season's records (Cal finished 6-12 in the Pac-10, Stanford 13-5). Montgomery gets all this without having to leave the Bay Area, and he gets to hire son John. The bottom line: This worked out perfectly for Montgomery. ➤ Of all the water-testing players on the NBA's early-entry list, the one generating the most buzz among scouts is West Virginia SF **Joe Alexander**. His late-season scoring surge—he averaged 23.8 points over the final nine games—was impressive enough to make him a first-round candidate. But he could become a lottery pick with a strong senior season. ➤ Mississippi State was about the only high-major program to offer a scholarship to SG **Ben Hansbrough** two years ago, and that sharp move helped the Bulldogs reach the 2008 NCAA Tournament. Hansbrough averaged 10.5 points and saved an important road win at South Carolina with three late free throws. But Hansbrough never was comfortable there, and that prompted him to transfer to Notre Dame. He'll fit right in as **Kyle McAlarney's** replacement in 2009-10. ➤ The Big East is clinging to misplaced loyalty with a conference rule that prohibits athletes who sign a letter of intent with one member from escaping that letter and signing with another conference school. Case in point: PG **Tyshawn Taylor** of Jersey City, N.J., signed with Marquette but asked for a release when **Tom Crean** left to coach Indiana. Because of the rule, Taylor was off-limits to New Jersey-based Big East teams Rutgers and Seton Hall and wound up choosing Kansas. The theory behind the rule is to discourage players from vacating their letters if they really want to play in the Big East. But in practice, it's forcing some top-notch talent to head elsewhere.

The national title will be settled the BCS way through 2013.
So don't waste your breath if your team gets screwed this fall.

Is a playoff dead? Let's just say dead-ended for now

By Matt Hayes

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It was almost a throwaway line, a statement made partly in jest, but eerily foretelling.

The men behind the Bowl Championship Series had just revealed that, try as they might, the college football postseason was no closer to change and probably never would be. The faces and body language around the big table full of the sport's power brokers told the story of months of fruitless heavy lifting.

Big 12 commissioner Dan Bebee pushed back from the table, with last week's annual BCS meetings almost done, exhaled and summed up where college football is—and how far it still has to go.

"Things change," Bebee said, "when you have funerals or retirements."

Rarely has a statement been more dead-on. No pun intended.

Forget about choosing sides; that doesn't make sense at this point. College football will stay with the controversial BCS championship format through the 2013 season and maybe much longer.

But for those who want change—a playoff, a mini-playoff, a plus-one championship game—there is hope, but it is years away. And getting there will require navigating a maze of twists and turns that could make even the most ardent supporters weary from the fight. The components and scenarios are there but may never align.

The reality is this argument goes nowhere without a consensus from the 11 conference commissioners. There are three camps within the group: those interested in change (SEC, ACC), those against it (Pac-10, Big Ten, Big East) and those who could be swayed (Big 12, five non-BCS conferences).

"You never say never," says Pac-10 commis-

sioner Tom Hansen. "But I can't envision a scenario where things would change."

But if you look at it this way, here's how things could change:

Pac-10. Hansen, 70, begins his 25th season as Pac-10 commissioner this fall and most certainly will retire by 2013—and likely much sooner. Any new commissioner will be proactive in trying to improve the conference's standing and reputation east of the Rocky Mountains. Any postseason playoff—or whatever you want to call it—would dramatically improve the Pac-10's stature. It is a regional conference that needs a more national mindset.

Big Ten. Jim Delany, the sport's most powerful commissioner, is locked in. But those close to him believe he could be tempted by the athletic director job at North Carolina, his alma mater. The job is huge—a challenging and successful 28-sport program that could intrigue Delany—and current A.D. Dick Baddour is close to retiring.

Big East. It was only five months ago that the Big East, on BCS probation of sorts after being raided by the ACC earlier this decade, had its status renewed as an automatic qualifier for the series championship. In other words, the Big East is not in a position of power and would follow momentum.

Big 12. Bebee was very clear that the league's university presidents don't want "any type of NFL-style playoff." But Bebee, like SEC commissioner Mike Slive, has the temperament and persuasive personality to sell a system. If Slive could do it within the SEC—a league that has won three of the past five BCS championships and benefited from BCS controversy each time—Bebee can do the same in the Big 12, which patterns itself after the SEC.

Non-BCS leagues. How could these guys not be happy with the current setup? Hawaii received \$4 million for playing in a BCS bowl. USC, meanwhile, got \$1.8 million for playing in the Rose Bowl as part of the Pac-10



speedreads

Don't feel too sorry for LSU that **Ryan Perrilloux** finally was kicked off the team. Quarterbacks Jarrett Lee and Andrew Hatch played much better this spring than the staff anticipated. Besides, LSU won national titles in 2007 and 2003 with a couple of decent quarterbacks managing the games.

Say what you want about Nick Saban, but Alabama's coach continues to find new ways to gig the NCAA. For that, he's my hero. The NCAA says head coaches can't recruit off campus in the spring evaluation period—the so-called "Saban Rule"—so Saban starts video conferencing with recruits. And there's nothing in the NCAA rules that says he can't. For now, anyway.

Two more bowl games have been added to the postseason field for a total of 34. What's that old saying? Hogs get slaughtered. The more the NCAA gorges, the more riskier it becomes. There were 71 bowl-eligible teams last fall, just three more than the 68 that will be needed to fill the bowls. That's cutting it mighty close.



With Cowan (left) out and Olson sidelined, UCLA is low on crutches and quarterbacks.

revenue-sharing plan. Still, there would be little resistance from the "Group of Five" because even if a playoff might mean less access, it would bring potential for significantly more money.

"I don't know if you can say it will never happen," Delany says. "It will be for future people—commissioners, athletic directors, presidents—to decide where this is headed."

Those talks probably won't begin until 2011, well after the series is into its second television contract with FOX. That contract will be completed after the 2013 season, the same year ABC/ESPN's current contract with the Rose Bowl ends. Only then, the dynamics could be completely different: New leadership at the commissioner level and three network television companies (FOX, ABC/ESPN, CBS) driving up the cost of the product.

"It's on the table now," Slive says. "Everyone knows it's there. It's a marathon, not a sprint."

A race—a debate—that may never end. **SN**

INSIDE DISH

UCLA's quarterback situation is a mess that even quarterbacks guru **Norm Chow** may not be able to fix. Projected starter **Patrick Cowan** is out for the season with a knee injury. Backup **Ben Olson**, the former uberrecruit who also is injured (broken foot), doesn't connect with the team and doesn't have the personality to lead the offense. That means the job could fall to junior college transfer **Kevin Craft**, son of former San Diego State coach **Tom Craft**. Kevin Craft was set to sign with Hawaii before **June Jones** left for SMU. ➤ **Ben Mauk's** fight with the NCAA isn't over yet. The family of Cincinnati's star quarterback has hired an attorney—and might sue the NCAA—in an effort to gain a sixth year of eligibility, according to a source close to the situation. Mauk will appear before the NCAA Student-Athlete Reinstatement Committee as early as next month. If that appeal doesn't work, the family will pursue legal action. Mauk played his senior season at Cincinnati after transferring from Wake Forest. His 2006 season at Wake ended after he was injured in the first game. Mauk had foot surgery before enrolling at Wake

in 2003 and sat out as a freshman. In denying Mauk's appeal, the NCAA said it lacked "contemporaneous" documents from the Wake Forest medical staff.

➤ Texas Tech coach **Mike Leach** complained about a lack of focus for his offense this spring, but he could

have his best defense since he arrived in Lubbock in 2000. Eight starters return from last year's unit that was embarrassed early in the season, then steadily improved after Leach fired **Lyle Setencich** in late September and replaced him with **Ruffin McNeill**. Tech's front four is strong—DE **Brandon Williams** will be the best edge rusher in the Big 12—and could get more help when **Brandon Sesay**, rated among the nation's best junior college ends, arrives in the fall. ➤ Cal DE **Cameron Jordan**, one of the nation's top freshmen last fall, has blossomed this spring in the Bears' new system. Jordan's frame (6-4, 286) and speed off the edge fit perfectly in the 3-4 scheme. The 3-4 also is a good fit for DE **Rulon Davis**, a part-time starter who battled injuries the past two years but has been a strong pass rusher when healthy. Cal was 84th in the nation with 22 sacks last fall.

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Get answers with attitude every week in Matt Hayes' mailbag at sportingnews.com.



EXPOSURE

And the flames went higher

For Hornets fans, the taste of Super Hugo's trampoline-fueled dunk was sweet—but his ring of fire wouldn't stop burning. Workers had to use foam extinguishers to kill the flames, and Game 1 of the Hornets-Spurs Western Conference semifinal series was delayed 19 minutes while the debris was cleaned from the floor.



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